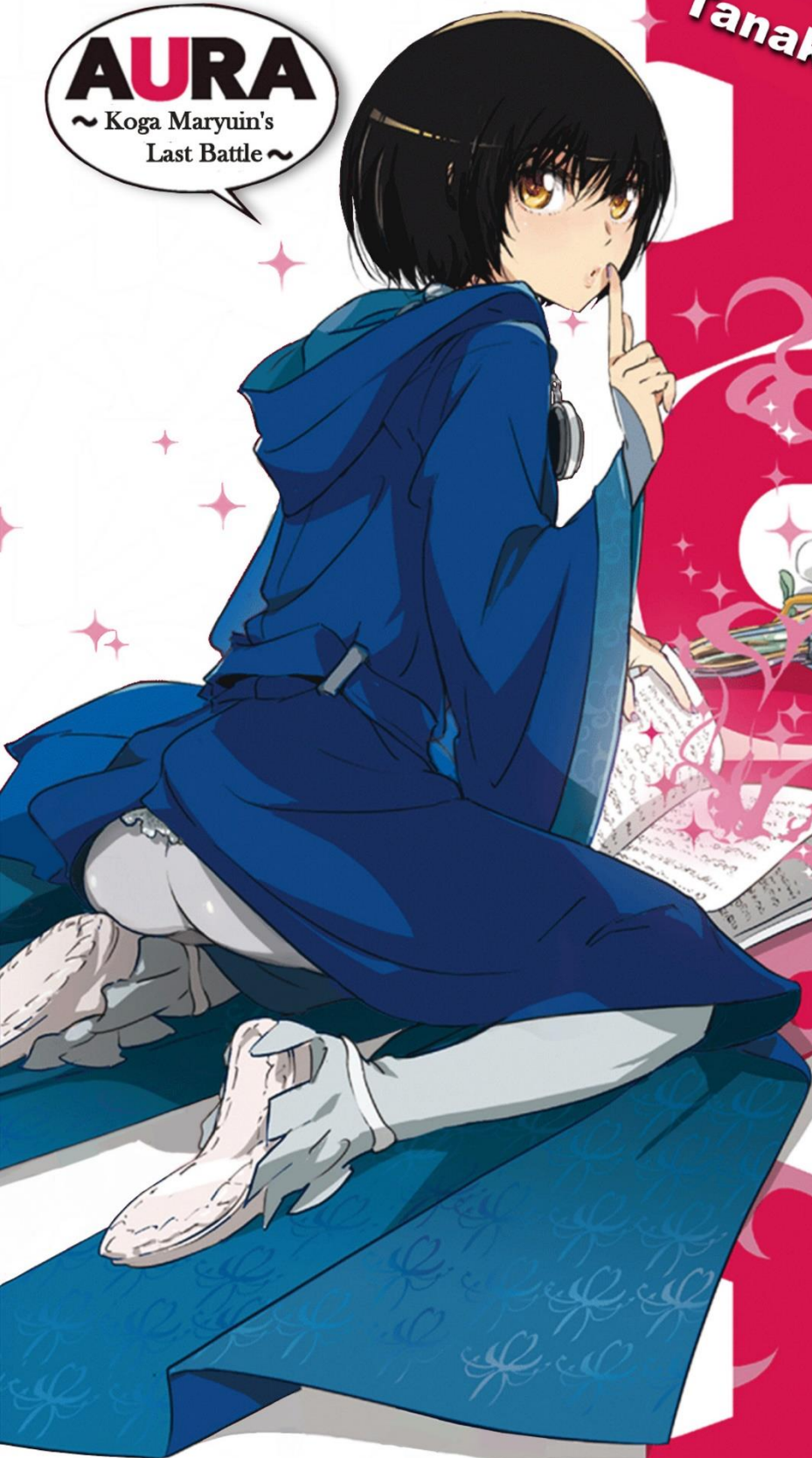


AURA

~ Koga Maryuin's
Last Battle ~

Tanaka Romeo

Illustrated by mebae



GAGAGA

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And so Comes the
Time to Return

CHARACTER

Satou Ichirou ----- The main Character, AKA Mens.

Satou Ryouko ----- Heroine. Claims to be a witch from another world.

Homeroom Teacher----- Has his eye on Mens. AKA Dorisen.

School Nurse----- Holds a certain important item.

Ooshima Yumina ----- Queen of the Class

Kobato Shinako ----- A ditzy classmate.

Takahashi Yuuta----- Leader of the class boys.

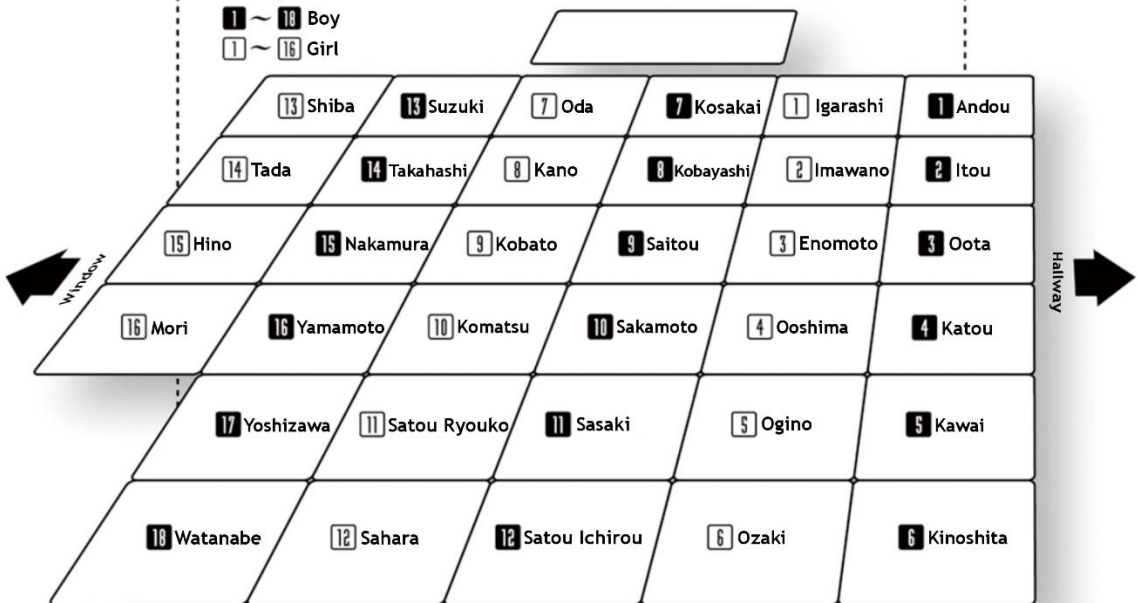
Sister ----- Satou Ichirou's older sister.

Kume ----- He who sells accessories.

Seating

1 ~ 18 Boy

1 ~ 16 Girl



On the rooftop of a building, drenched black by the rain that had carried through from the evening, two men stood opposed without so much as an umbrella.

A man in black, a man in white. The one in black was a tall, firmly built young man. He hung his black overcoat directly over his bare skin. Age-wise, he looked to be in his early twenties. The long hair that grew to his hips had reached a glistening damp, yet his broad shoulders that would never have him mistaken as a woman exuded a peculiar sensuality. An intrepid beauty in his visage that would turn the head of anyone he walked passed was now clad in a sharp, cold murderous intent.

In contrast, the white adorned a man built like a rock. While he was not tall by traditional convention, not an inch of his body was spared from his muscles that swelled to an armor-esque degree. Through the ferocious fighting spirit dwelling within, that brought to mind a large, carnivorous beast, his brawny body pushing up through his clothing must have been one tempered through real combat.

With a few meters open between the two sides, neither showed the slightest twitch. For more than the past few minutes, they had stood frozen like this.

The petty yells of street thugs resonated from the night shopping district below. Those threatening complaints to intimidate another, when heard from a roof shrouded in true bloodlust, failed to reach the level of a child's quarrel. Evidently, both sides had taken up their weapon to murder the other, after all. What caught the eye was by no means a small firearm, nor a knife nor any other household blade.

A katana and an axe.

The man in black with a long-sword, seemingly taller than he was; the white-dressed man poised with a thick, sturdy axe in each hand. It was easy to imagine from their stalwart stances that they had both reached a considerable mastery of their craft.

While these were anachronistic props straight out of a medieval

battlefield, that didn't give the leisure to blow the atmosphere away with a laugh. Each one of these three weapons were an article an average joe would struggle to properly lift up. The force unleashed from these masses of heavy metal could more than easily destroy the human form.

"Nngg...!" At the end of this drawn-on staring contest, the man in white groaned. Deep resentment spat out from his mouth topped by a mustache. "Maryuin, I shall slay thee here and now... I must finish things once and for all!"

The black-dressed man called Maryuin made no attempt to respond. He glared unerringly at his foe without moving a muscle. The hilt of his longsword gripped in two hands, he maintained its point held at shoulder height before him, its blade level to the ground. When a blade reached this length, its weight became considerable. The simple fact he could hold a stance with it outstretched spoke volumes to his abnormal physical prowess—albeit, from a strength standpoint, he would have to raise the white flag to his white-clad foe.

"As a holy knight in service to the Divine Dragon Astaloy! Nay... as a single patriot with love for his country, I shall... lay you to rest!"

Without expecting an answer, the man continued his one-sided dialogue.

"....."

His body swelled a size larger. His was building up his power. The twin axes he had crossed in front of his chest rubbed to a dull grating sound.

"Accursed traitor! Take this, Magic Beast's Roaring Fang!"

Alongside his scream, the man's lower body bent as he released the power he had stored.

The step he took in spread cracks along the concrete floor. Hefty leg-strength accelerated his slow-looking bulk off like a bullet. Charging the greatest power he could muster, with his axes crossed, this was a grand-scale technique to pulverize his opponent defenses and all. A means to stop such a charge full-on didn't exist in any branch of martial arts. Either avoid it, or prevent it before it could

be unleashed. A special move like a waterfall. But the holy knight's foe, even with a whirlwind of killing intent right before him, Maryuin's face showed not the slightest sign of fluster.

Muttering, "Hidden sword, Nanashiki," he lowered his hips. The blade of his sword let off a faint flash. And—

"...Inconceivable," the man soundlessly mouthed.

A few seconds later, the one to fall was the man in white. He fell onto his back, the stagnant rainclouds above filling his field of vision. He felt no pain. Strangely enough, his prior tensions and the force of his charge, like a memory from years past, grew distant from his five senses. Even if he was struck down, if he received a counterattack exceeding his charge, it was inconceivable that he felt no impact.

Why, he thought as he searched out his old foe. His head wouldn't move. His sensations had died out in their entirety. Moving only his eyes, he directed a glance at the man standing nearby. At his feet lay a body all dressed in white.

"I see."

In that instant, he understood everything. That the sensations themselves had been severed in one stroke. Meaning—

"He took my head."

The man who had become nothing more than a head thought.

Maryuin's abnormally long katana was made to sever a foe while cleanly evading a charge. To think, come so far, he had forgotten the special traits of the swordsman who had once accompanied him across the battlefield. What a farce that at the same time, even his anger was fading away. Did his will to fight and his desires lie not in his head but his limbs? Most surprising was Maryuin's technique. The cut was so clean, he could still think after his head was severed—what a reliable swordsman. Whenever they fought together, he had always played second fiddle. At the bar, he would share a laugh with the brat who was ten years his junior, but inside, he always directed a deep-seated respect.

"... That's right. You always were the... stronger one." He smiled. As if to say there were no grudges to be had in loss, he directed gentle

eyes at his bitter foe. “Maryuin, why did you betray us?”

The man mouthed, upon which he abruptly went still. With its oxygen cut off, the brain had died.

The emotionless eyes of the man called Maryuin surveyed the empty husk. Raindrops seeped through his bangs, falling past the sides of his eyes. As if he was shedding a flood of tears.

“Holy knight Balzac... I make no apologies. But one day, once it’s all over, the time will come for me to join you.”

An immense amount of blood discharged onto the rooftop. Only the blood sticking to the blade was washed clean by the rain. Without swinging off the excess liquid, Maryuin returned the sword blade to its sheath, his black overcoat trailing as he turned.

“Until the day I... kill the Divine Dragon Astaroy. Until then, farewell, old friend.”

Once the victor had left, the remaining husk spontaneously burst into flames. A blue flame. Without raising smoke, it burned through flesh and bone. So as not to leave a single drop of blood. This was the Oath of the Flame. A magical pact of the ‘Mirror World,’ any knight setting off was obligated to make. No trace of the loser would remain. It was for this reason that only a small few would come to know of the harsh wars that unfolded right underneath the reality of modern Japanese society—

– Excerpt from the Legend of Maryuin, Volume 9

My high school debut was a success.

I had earned it as compensation for devoting practically all of my unsparing time from graduation to commencement. Hard work will be rewarded. I don't think that's universally true, but this time alone, I fell right in the center of that platitude.

I was overjoyed. Goodbye to the unpopular me. Welcome new me, Nouvelle Moi.

Without standing out any more than necessary, without being miserably hidden away or ignored, a normal high school boy was what I was aiming for. Point being, while belatedly, I had laid hands on a normality fitting of Satou Ichirou: the ubiquitous name gracing the entry box on my registry at city hall.

Even so, a high school debut is quite an interesting concept. Late to every trend, I coincidentally stumbled upon the term online. For someone who had only just escaped the living hell of middle school, it was akin to a revelation of salvation.

High school is a fresh start.

Thrust to motion by extraordinary passion, I spent the entirety of my break carrying out self-reformation. I fixed my bad habit of my eyes going bloodshot whenever I talked by conversing with myself in the mirror, and when it came to conversations, I resolved my tendency of droning on by obligating myself to take a silent breath here and there. Faults are the sort of things that keep coming out the more you look for them. Thanks to that, my dedication had reached tens upon tens of entries. Stand with your back straight. Be careful not to speak in a strange voice. Properly look at the person you're talking to. Don't scatter saliva. Wear decent clothing (God bless Uniqlo). Don't keep your mouth half-open. No humming in class. Absolutely no monologuing. No faking phone calls. No matter what. Don't live in high tensions. Showing overreactions is a crime. Strange faces, a life sentence. On top of that, I properly went to a salon and changed my hairstyle.

When there was only a day left of vacation, I saw a tentative completion in my reforms. The last remnants were spent thoroughly cleaning my room. It took an entire day to sort out

everything that would prove unnecessary in my life to come, box them, and put them out, but my room had become a great deal tidier.

It hurt my chest to look at the empty bookshelves. But that was all. It's often said a bookshelf is a portion of the heart. Going by that logic, a new me would need a new heart installed. I knew I could just use my time to fill in the gap left behind.

Once I slept that night and got up, it was the day of the entrance ceremony. I challenged my high school life as a new me.

"Mornin' Issan." "Hey, barely made it I see."

Kawai and Kobayashi were valuable dear friends I had gained in my first week of high school. I had to wonder if my debut was as much of a success as these two. Quite likely. I evidently started out from a lower point, after all.

"Were you watching yesterday?" "For real?" "Read anything good?" Arbitrarily chiming in, I looked over the classroom. Someone who had already joined a club, worn out from morning practice.

Someone eating sweet bread. Someone reading a book alone. There were various sorts. As there was still time to class, a little over ten were present. With how little time had passed from commencement, a majority were still isolated. But one must always be vigilant. The starting dash of one's first year is vital. Whether one joined some group or remained all alone would be decided by their impression and conduct during this period. Normal was a considerably difficult trait to pull off.

It went without saying, but an unseen disparity existed within the class.

As groups formed, a stern power relation would inevitably surface in between each unit. It was difficult to join a group with power after time spent in isolation. Whoever started alone would end up plastered with the 'loner character' label. These real-life experiences were the highest form of study one could achieve in school. At the same time, as we were learning in the field, the pain of failure was just as real.

Given the current climate, from the first day, I concentrated on

selecting people to talk to. It was before seat changes, so the desks were simply lined by attendance number. The order was boy-girl-boy-girl; unless I consciously moved, it would be difficult to find friends of the same gender.

Talks of seat changes would come before long.

I had to finalize a group already so I could secure the best spot in the back by the window. I needed to demonstrate my group's power while I still had time. Through middle school, I was always in the frontmost row in front of the teacher's desk. I didn't have the right to choose where I sat. Now I did. And how delightful it was.

By converting my minuses into zeros, my high school debut plan was a splendid success. My end goal was normal, so from the start, I had no plot to eagerly climb up the class hierarchy.

My position in center field was one I would defend to the death.

"Come to think of it, what are you guys doing for clubs?"

The free talk shifted to school.

After I stated there wasn't anywhere in particular I wanted to enter, both Kawai and Kobayashi said they wanted to join a sports club.

We wouldn't be able to hang out in that case. I was right in the mood to change the subject.

"If you join a club, there's no time to play."

"That's the thing." "I get you."

My trouble-diverting statement called forth unforeseen approval. I had finally become normal, so learning how to have fun like a high school student wasn't a bad idea. Karaoke, window shopping and the like.

"Hey, hey, who's playing?"

Casually entering the conversation was Saitou, a boy with short hair. Our class was full of all sorts of common names like Satous and Saitous, so it may be hard to tell who's who, but I hardly interacted with these sorts, so I wasn't going to remember each Tom, Dick and Clancy that came up. If anything, I just had to commit my memory to the Takahashi Group soon to arrive.

"Saitou, you play around?" asked Kawai.

"Nah, back when I was a middler(middle schooler) I played quite a

bit.”

He made a sociable smile. Appearance-wise, he gave off quite a stern look, but it seemed he wasn't too scary of a character. If we got to know one another, would he become a part of my normalizing plan? Or so I pondered as the front sliding door slammed open.

At the head of the gathering boldly sauntering into the classroom, a good-height, good-looks man unveiled his unfaltering clear voice.

“Morning all. Say hello to today's Takahashi”

I light laugh rose around the classroom.

“Sup, pleasure to be here.”

Approximately equal to Takahashi in height, weight, and looks, yet falling just a little short in charisma, the adjutant-like existence Yamamoto picked up after him in cool, low spirits. Rumor had it he was already performing in the soccer club.

Following behind those two greetings came a slender delicate youth, moreover, a set of three girls who went beyond pretty.

A group of three boys, three girls. Each one pretty in their own right.

Not subpar or normal, those belonging to the special course. The Nobles. The MVPs. Any onlooker could tell they were the charisma of the class. Their brilliance was something else. Their aura was something else.

... Right, what separated the light from the dark was always aura. It was something anyone could see... though putting it that way may make me sound like a spiritual counselor. The ability to read one's atmosphere was a skill essentially everyone came equipped with.

Take, for instance, a delinquent, an otaku, a playboy, their auras were easy enough to classify.

Each and every member of the Takahashi Group was on the level of a standard celebrity. The men cool and tasteful, the women cute and stylish. Even their aura on another level. The Phantom Troupe of this class was undisputedly these guys.

I could get if there was one or two in a class, but we ended up with six. And they started hanging out in the blink of an eye. Right, groups were generally constructed of those of the same rank. As a

matter of fact, the instant those Takahashis came in, the attention in class was sucked in their direction.

Kawai and Kobayashi awkwardly averted their eyes. I understood the sentiment; Up to a moment ago, we were speaking heart to heart, but that was derailed in an instant. Furthermore,

“Takahashi-kun, a-yo!”

Saitou, who’d been discussing play with us changed direction as if a switch had been flipped, turning face to greet high lord Takahashi.

“Hey now,” Kawai lightly retorted.

“Oh, umm... sorry, was it Nakamura?”

I almost did a spit take. Nakamura was the average looking seat number fifteen. Takahashi was fourteen, cool Yamamoto was sixteen. Meaning, seat-wise, he sat between Takahashi and Yamamoto. Not remembering Saitou was one thing, but to forget Nakamura, who’d been sandwiched between his group for a week, as expected of a bloody noble, I guess.

... Still, I guess that’s what you expect from a difference in status.

“So mean. I’m Saitou, remember?” his smile was stiff.

“Aah, sorry, sorry! Everyone in this class has a common name, see... real sorry!”

Looks like he was thinking something similar. I sympathized ever so slightly. It did seem that today’s hotty was the sort of guy who would properly put his hands together and lower his head to a plebian. The most painful part had to be how the other nobles didn’t participate in the conversation in the slightest. As if they couldn’t put up with this, or rather, I ended up impressed that Saitou was able to speak so nonchalantly.

“Don’t worry about it, just try to remember. In exchange, you have my support if it comes down to it.”

“For real? Well I’d love you guys’ backing, Saitou. That’s seriously the best.”

Mutual agreement. As I kept the corner of my eye on that grand exchange among ranks, Kobayashi made a quiet proposal.

“... And wait, can’t we go with the three of us? Playing?”

“One vote for that,” came Kawai.

Both sides worked out. Saitou's patronizing attitude, and Kawai and Kobayashi's sullenness, I could understand both sides. Regardless, for now, it was wiser to go along with the two of them.

"I'll wait and see. If that happens, we'll go with that."

Weasels happened to be my favorite animals; I had no hesitation to use weasel words.

Just a sliver of silence descended among our dampened spirits, and when it was about time for the talk to wrap up, a single shadow that had slipped out of the royal family to wander around the classroom approached.

"Good morning, Kawai-kun, Kobayashi-kun, Satou-kun."

"... Morning, Kobato-san."

The only one to expect it, I was the only one who could immediately reply. A little delayed, "Y-yeah," "Morning," Kawai and Kobayashi groaned out some responses.

"I always see you three together~."

Her bouncing, sweetly swaying intonation filled the surroundings with a soothing wave. The wave carried a floral scent.

"We formed a trio, after all."

"Oh~, I see. Congratulations." Clap clap clap, some unironic applause.

Kobato Shinako. One of the three noble girls. The type easy to develop a crush on, but rather plain was her first impression, though in truth she was a tad absentminded. A glimpse of that could be seen in how she went around in the morning greeting all her classmates individually.

"You formed a sextet yourself, didn't you?"

When I replied, she came to a complete stop, her smile fixed on her face.

For someone as sociable as Kobato-san, it was rare for her to abstain from throwing back the conversational ball. Rather, she looked to be at a loss for worse. Her smile that had turned into a still photo reddened before my eyes.

A red-tinted face tilted somewhat.

"S... e... x...?"

Leaked a mechanical voice.

Oh, I almost cried out. I figured out the reason she petrified. How could it be? It did seem she was a considerably naïve person. She was part of the classes' starting lineup, so I was certain she already had that under control, but apparently, she boasted a maiden-ness appropriate for her age. It came around to my turn for a confused refutation.

"Ah, no! That's not what it means. You're misunderstanding, misconstruing, completely wrong."

"S... sex... tit...s?"

"Wrong, I say!" So she heard it that way after all. "It means a group of six. Trio, quartet, quintet, sextet, right?"

"O-oh I see. I didn't know the last one... phew, that was a surprise." She made a gesture of holding her head. "My mind went straight to the gutter. I should have known better."

"Don't worry about it, Kobato-san."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll do my best. Thanks."

Kobato-san lightly waved a hand in front of her chest as she turned towards the other students. I saw her off with a mirrored gesture as I mused over how amazing I was to talk normally with such a cute girl—a part of me considering it someone else's business.

I already felt soothed to my soul.

Among the noble houses, it looked like Takahashi and Kobato-san gave off favorable-enough impressions. I immediately brought them up in the conversation.

"Kobato-san's a good kid."

"... Well, she's kinda cute, I guess." "A bit plain."

To my frank impression, almighty Kawai and Kobayashi dashed on some impudent utterances.

"You think so? I think it's nice how she's not all caked up."

"Sure, cakey's a no go, but she could be a bit more graceful."

"Right, it's got to be the queen."

The two plainly showed off the difference in our tastes.

The queen was the leader of the noble gathering's three girls. She went by Ooshima Yumina. At first, I wondered what sort of name

was that, but she didn't lose out to it. At the very least, among the three girls, there was no doubt she was the most conspicuous type of beauty. Unfortunately, neither did her personality fall short of her name, and the regal way she carried herself stood out. Plainly put, she sat on a high horse. Not the sort I could get along with.

"... We've got some risktakers here."

As this and that was going on, students filtered in one after the net. When the teacher came in timed precisely with the bell, almost everyone was in their seat.

"Good morning everyone," the tall, bespectacled male teacher vibrantly proclaimed. "... Will whoever's on day duty... oh, we haven't decided that yet. Umm, then seat number fifteen, take us away."

"Boy or girl?" asked the class noble Takahashi.

"Oh right, then a female student please."

Seat number fifteen. A girl called Hino stood up. She immediately slumped onto the floor.

"Hino-san, what's wrong?"

"... Not enough... blood... and the... sun is up, so..."

Painfully wheezing, she leaned her forehead against her desk, her entire body shaking. The homeroom teacher approached her.

"Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"Urgh... if only I had some... I'd be fine."

Hino muttered. If only I had _____, I heard. What fit in the _____ was most likely—

I shook my head. Nothing to do with me. I don't know her. She's not my friend, and we'd never exchanged words.

"Let's go to the infirmary. Our infirmary has an exclusive goddess of nursing to look after you."

Saying some incomprehensible things, the homeroom teacher continued muttering as he led Hino off. Thanks to that, a dubious amount of time was freed up in class, so I absentmindedly surveyed the room. The desks were lined six by six. My seat number was twelve, the very back of the second boys' row. Box seats.

My eyes were first drawn to an area ahead and to the left of me. The

zone where plain-looking Nakamura was sandwiched between two class nobles. Takahashi and his right-hand Yamamoto had already begun talking across poor Nakamura's desk.

It seemed Nakamura was not part of the conversation, as he seemed rather restless. I can't say I didn't feel for him, but such are the ways of the world. He would have to give up.

Takahashi Yuuta. It was a delightful miscalculation on my part that the strongest character had such a cheery personality.

His partner Yamamoto's bad-boy aura was something anyone could see. The work put into his hair, his daily changing accessories, the way he perfectly pulled off the rough way he wore his uniform. Full marks on his sturdy impression, he was like the contrastive shadow to Takahashi. If both of them were shadows, there would probably be bullying in the class by now. It was because Takahashi treated even those below his second fiddles so favorably that Yamamoto had no choice but to keep quiet.

Meanwhile, on the girls' side, Queen Ooshima Yumina had all the traits necessary for a bully. Her side two looked peaceful enough, but there was no telling how that front would develop. Personally speaking, I could only wish for Kobato-san's healing effect to spread over the entirety of humanity.

Whatever the case, nobles, and second fiddles, and plebeians, it all does sound so cynical, and I'll admit they are detestable terms. But there existed those who couldn't fall into such categories and for a clear distinction, those concerned will simply have to accept their descriptors.

By the way, Kobato-san sat three seats ahead of me on the left. She was reading a paperback she had produced from her bag. What kind of book could she have been reading? I felt a soaring in my chest as I fixed my gaze on the brief glimpses I caught of the cover. I threw my head back.

If you'll let me use an original word, the cover was buried in the drawing of an animeified female. The title was 'Shakugan no—'
I rested my head on the table.

I couldn't properly sort out the conflicted emotions swirling in my

heart. The current me was unable to look at such contents with straight sincerity. A psychological battering, it would be. Screwing my head to take my eyes off of Kobato-san, I gazed two seats behind her.

An empty chair. No one had sat there for the past week. By that point, I would have loved to hear any sort of question; yet in regards to that ever-absent female student, there wasn't much to ask. Only a single question properly filled my mind:

Just when exactly was she going to attend school?

When classes ended and we were discussing going somewhere to hang out, he who was knighted face-change man (by me), Saitou came over (despite Kawai's unpleasant face) and proposed this.

"Let's go look at accessories."

Dim on the subject, I took a peek at how the other two were going to move, but they both seemed just as troubled to answer. It seemed that all three of us were lacking in experience points. Saitou conceitedly supplemented his statement.

"If you don't know 'bout them, I'll teach 'ya. I'm an expert."

While I didn't like how he put it, getting irritated over such a thing wasn't constructive. This was the all-important first term of high school. I was better off riding these waves.

"Well why not. Teach away."

When I answered so, Saitou nodded in satisfaction.

"But just guys sounds stuffy, right? Why don't we invite some girls?"

"I don't know any yet," Kawai said in a sullen tone. As if that was the switch, Saitou turned to the classroom as a whole.

"I'm going to go look at accessories, but are there any girls who want to tag along?"

The girls preparing to go home simultaneously looked at Saitou. This guy's got balls, was my honest impression. Even if I did something similar, it would seem like an awkward outburst. Even so, I might have to build up some sort of resistance. He may turn

out to be an important figure.

Now then, as for the girls' reactions.

"... H-huh? No one?"

Not a single sociable lass who would readily raise their name.

It had been on my mind since school began, but the class was full of weirdos. There were loners who didn't make friends or talk to anyone in any class, but men and women together, there were around fifteen in ours. No matter how I considered it, this was a peculiar deployment. When those sorts of students should be dispersed among each class, it was as if the management didn't get it at all.

"Last chance! With this special offer, I'll even treat you to drinks at a diner!"

Saitou made double sure. It wasn't very effective. The man didn't even seem to notice the girls' reaction was something different from a simple cold shoulder.

"... How cold." The isolation was painful. At this rate, I would be enlisted in the class clowns. I wanted to run away. The looks from the loner girls resembled that of the female vengeful spirits from horror movies.

By the window, Queen Bee Ooshima Yumina was laughing over something. She was with Kobato and one more. It was clear as day we were being laughed at. How embarrassing.

"... None. Now what to do."

"Then let me have a go. Since we've got nothing to lose, might as well aim high."

Within the frigid cold fronts of Antarctica, for some reason, Kawai was uplifted. By my diagnosis, he was afflicted by Saitou's show of heroism. He started his way towards the window. Don't tell me he...?

A chill pierced through my spine. Kawai was already standing in front of 'that girl'.

"Ooshima Yumina-san, come and play with us! Aight! Nice to meet you!"

His high tensions and fruitless endeavors attained a nightmarish

collaboration. In regards to a girl his age, he gave a bow with his hand outstretched for a handshake. Just what era did he come from? Kawai Shuutaro, sixteen, Spontaneously Combusts. If this scene was a piece of art, that would undoubtedly be the title.

Ooshima grandly burst into laughter.

“How about no?” just as expected. Living normally is difficult. Exceedingly difficult. Get a little in over your head, and this is what you get.

“Play with your bunch? You must be joking. Do you even see yourself in the mirror every day?”

Listening to her rejection akin to an icicle through the crown, I reached the dazed-out phase far sooner than any among us four. To that point, I lived a life full of shame. Who’s to say it ever ended?

“Maaan, so in the end, it’s four dudes.”

“Boil it down, and that’s your fault.”

Clad in a negative aura, Kawai relentlessly retorted to Saitou’s lament.

“The hell. You were marching in enemy territory too. Singling out the queen is plain retarded.”

In the end, we went out with four boys. The mood of defeat still lingering. To whoever thought up the phrase ‘nothing ventured, nothing gained,’ I’d like to have a word in that back alley. They could never have known the modern world.

“Well, whatever. Always a next time.”

Not if I have any say in it. I decided to hammer in the point.

“I think it’ll be a hard stretch in our class. The cute girls have already formed their groups.”

“That’s just Takahashi-kun’s women, right?” Well, that’s one way to put it. “Then do you want to play pickup? You think you’re capable?”

Our directionless sighs overlapped.

One train stop away led to a moderate business district. The destination was an accessory shop only Saitou knew about. Even if

his dignity had crumbled, he would live by his word. The word accessories just wasn't hitting home. Gemstones? Armbands? I grew anxious over what to do if we entered some full-blown jewelry store.

"We're here."

He came to a stop in front of a booth.

A stand at around waist-height, lined with small metallic ornaments glistening like the night sky. Necklaces, bracelets, rings. While few in numbers, some leather bands too. The tall and lean presumed shopkeeper sat on a pipe chair by the side, reading a magazine. An oriental pattern-embroidered long T-shirt, skinny jeans, and a strangely formal-ish black cap suited him to an unnatural extent.

Hmm, so hats count as accessories, I mused.

"Kume-saaaan," as Saitou called out, the shopkeeper raised his face.

"Welcome, umm... you're...?"

Saitou was forgotten again.

"How mean. It's me, Saitou," his smile was stiff.

"Oh, Saitou, is it? Saitou-kun... sorry, sorry."

"These here are my classmates, 'n I brought them to see your stuff."

He introduced us all together.

"Well then have a good look. Take your time... nah, I don't have too much to look at, but do have a look."

A bit bashful, Kume-san lightly lowered his head. He was, perhaps a little over twenty. I wouldn't call him a peerless looker, but he had a good vibe around him and an amiable face. A good aura.

We silently bent down to pour our attention on the stand. I thought it was nothing but skull rings, and cross and angel wing necklaces, but those flashy items only made up a small portion. The rest were all simple but tasteful pieces. The price wasn't anything crazy either. Regardless of whether or not I was confident I could properly wear them, I was fascinated.

"Are these produced by you, Kume-san?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right. Ah, but those ones are a consignment from a friend."

He pointed out a corner full of skull rings and blood-stained

crosses.

"I thought so. They were giving off a different sort of feeling."

"Ahaha. I wouldn't doubt it. They're made in a different style and all."

"I've never worn this sort of stuff before... so I don't know where to start."

"Hmm. You'll rarely be able to wear most accessories at school. But how about," He pointed towards the leather straps.

"Something like that? That one's to hang on a cell phone. This over here's a wristwatch. Though I'll admit, the clock mechanism was cheap."

Both of them pulled at my heartstrings. The watch was especially night. A slender piece as if melded with a stylish wristband, and I took to it at a glance. One look at the price, and it was well within my range.

In the end, I was the only one to make a purchase before we left the stall. When I thought the day was going to end on a terrible note, my mood recovered with an unexpectedly nice purchase. I sure am cheap.

"Come to think of it," In a diner booth, leaning in like a melting snowman, Saitou changed the topic. "About the girls, there's still one we haven't seen yet, right?"

"You're talking about Satou, right?"

"Hello, need something?" I lightly barged in. Kawai next to me amiably pat me on the shoulder.

"Wrong one. I mean the Satou front left of you. Ladies' Satou."

The female Satou had yet to attend school once. No one knew what she looked like.

"There's a chance she's some super beauty," posed Saitou.

"Like hell, numbskull." "Drop dead," he was unanimously hit down. Whoever she was, if she hadn't come to school for a week, it was possible she would never come again. Something must have come up. She might quietly drop out or transfer somewhere else. It wasn't too rare. It was pointless to think up a reason. Any number of

changes can come to a teenage spirit.
... I was a prime example.

When I returned home, my mother quickly came to greet me.

"I'm home."

"W-welcome back. How was school?"

"Same old. I hung out with friends, and bought a cheap watch."

My mother looked relieved.

"I see. That's good, really good, that. I'm happy for you."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"It's fine. Perfectly fine. Do you have enough money?" She took out her wallet.

"I'm fine. I don't need any more than my monthly allowance. That's the rule."

I shook my hand. Lately, I rarely found an opportunity to use money. What I had left was plenty.

"If anything's wrong, you can talk to me."

"I know."

I made for my room on the second floor to end the conversation.

This time, my sister popped her head out from the back room.

"... Welcome back."

"Y-yeah, I'm home."

My conversations with her were still mentally strenuous.

"... School."

"Yes?"

"... How was it?"

"Mn, well, I think I'm doing good for myself. Probably..."

"... I see, yes, in that case... good."

Like a cutout in a poorly produced anime, her face stiffly retracted.

Our family was unsettled. It was all my fault so I couldn't complain.

After entering my room, I finally managed to relax.

I changed into my loungewear and inspected my purchase. Inside the cloth bag was the watch packed in vinyl, and a business card in place of a store advertisement.

My delight welled up. I didn't feel like throwing the wrapping or card.

I tried equipping the watch. A small timepiece interwoven between bundled leather bands. The sort of purchase I had never made before. Just like this, step by step, I just had to change my feelings. With my family, and with myself.

After dinner, I studied to around nine.

By my experience, the easiest and most efficient method consists eighty percent of just concentrating hard in class. The remaining twenty is to just review what you learned that day. Do that, and you won't have to panic before an exam anymore. Conversely, if you feel like you're drifting away during class, it will become an extraordinary liability on the exam. It's one of those tabs you build up.

"Geh, this is bad."

I went and forgot my textbook at school.

What's more, math class gave problems that had to be submitted the next day. I needed it now. While I had no choice but to go get it, it was hard to think the school was open at this hour. I wanted to avoid forgetting homework on the first week. At the end of my mulling, I decided to just go and see how far that got me. If it was no good, I could just turn back.

"... Let's give it a go."

Thanks to my good purchase, perhaps I was feeling optimistic.

Thankfully, school was within bikable distance.

Just around ten minutes. The light had long since left the staff room and front office, the night school returning to a silent stillness. Even so, there were supposed to be night guards so I couldn't be negligent.

Outside the premises, I parked my bike quite a distance away and made for the school building on foot. Keeping mindful of witnesses, it went smoothly up to the point I climbed over a low fence. All of a sudden, my fear burst to the surface. At this point, wasn't I

committing a crime?

Thinking about it calmly, it all reeked of criminal activity.

Expelled... well probably not, but if I was found, wouldn't I at least be suspended?

Perish the thought, or so I cheered myself on. Come so far, I couldn't return with no harvest. Additionally, I did have a lead on a route to infiltrate the school building. The molding on the first-floor boys' bathroom window was considerably worn down, and if you lifted up, you could easily remove the entire window. I quickly realized that while on toilet-cleaning duties.

When I made it to the destination point, the window had already been removed.

"What's this?"

Did whoever was on cleaning duty today leave it undone? The window glass leaned against the wall by my feet.

"Well, whatever... here we go."

After slipping in through the boys' lavatory, the scent of crime finally grew thick. I was struck by a bleak chill the moment I poked my face out into the corridor. It was the first time I ever saw the true face only a night's uninhabited construct could show. Unlike daytime, a space like a different world unfolded before me.

"To think just having no people would make such a difference..."

Dark. While starlight streamed in from the windows, my sight wouldn't make it all the way across. That being the case, if I walked with a light, I felt like I'd be caught in no time. I made for the classroom with one hand on the wall. The first year classes were on the third floor. Second years on the second, and thirds on the first. When I was just walking normally, it was almost as if I was making my steps deliberately louder. I naturally shifted into the gait of a burglar.

I cleared the landing to the second floor, made it up, and immediately reached my tip toes towards the third-floor stairwell. A coward's heart was already beating full throttle from such a paltry adventure. Making a slip up out of nervousness seemed idiotic, and speeding up would shorten my lifespan. I stopped, I took a few deep

breaths. The night's cold air carried a very different taste from the day's.

"... Okay."

My heart rate calmed to one point five resting pace. I walked again. Raising my head, I looked up at the third-floor landing. My heart—stopped.

The cold light of the moon poured in through the high-stationed window of the landing. It was because the window faced the moon, but having such direct exposure required a combination of time and angle. If I had to say, I had been caught up in a single instant of coincidence, but that wasn't the problem.

The school had shown me a different side under the cloak of the night; a special time, a special angle, the mystique of the third-floor landing, the light of the moon that had carried magic from the tales of yore. Perhaps in a moment caught by such mysterious coincidence, it was permitted for such beings beyond human knowledge to exist.

For there in the landing stood the witch in blue—

I stood stock still, as if I'd been struck.

I had no words. The moon diagonally spotlighting the landing; I stared at that bewitching stage from a few steps below. I could only stare. I couldn't move a single finger.

In contrast, the witch wasn't looking at me. The face peering out from her hood remained locked diagonally upwards, meaning she stared fixedly into the darkness of the school's third floor.

Beautiful.

Not pretty or cute, beautiful was the correct term.

A blue robe that concealed her down to her feet, the cloth stained the deep blue of the sea, her shapely face shining through as a pale accent. Lowering my eyes, I caught sight of a shimmering, metallic knot hanging at her chest. Her mechanical, overly tall staff was fastened to her bosom by the slight protrusion of fingers.

The crystallization of moonlight clad in the blue of the night. Like

an existence that had slipped out of a fog-covered kingdom of illusions.

My old wounds twitched in pain. Now this is shady as hell, they cried out. But the overwhelming detail standing before my eyes held it all down. Having encountered such an opponent, I had no idea how to cope.

On the contrary, if the other side noticed me, how would she react?

① She attacks → I run → The misunderstanding is cleared up, we reconcile and start working together, love may follow.

② “Run away!” she says as she fights the monster after her → I protect her → my quick wit fends off the monster, after which love.

③ She kisses me → The kiss is translation magic → the witch has to live at my house, there are some battles, after which love.

④ She collapses → I take her home and nurse her → the witch has to live at my house, there are some battles, after which love.

Hmm, the plot of number four was pretty much the same as three. Considering patterns and all, the modern trend would have me get straight up murdered for her to revive me with some high-level magic, but that requires a compensation and... no, I doubt this was the time for that.

Whatever the case. I swallowed my spit. Still searching for words, I opened my mouth.

“U-umm...?”

The girl’s sight slowly lowered to look at me.

As expected, the witch’s eyes were cold. Her piercing glare passed straight through me like an x-ray. That was a look, not at me as a person. A look as if she was doing little more than analyzing my physical information.

“What are you doing in a place like this?”

Moving my parched tongue, I somehow managed to pose the question.

The girl didn’t answer. She maintained a close watch over me.

Just as my anxiety was reaching a limit, all of a sudden, the staff emitted an electronic sound. The diode bulb-like portion on the tip

that looked like it could serve as a blunt weapon blinked for just an instant. I didn't really get it, but amazing.

The girl returned her eyes to the third floor.

"..... It's here."

"Huh? What is?"

Flustered as I was, an exaltation greater than ever before was born within me. I see, something's coming. Pattern two. Then how should I handle this?

Too timid to ascend to the landing, I turned just my head to follow the witch's field of vision. A vague, whitish substance swayed irregularly in space.

"... What's that?"

While I could see something like haze, I couldn't make it out. I could only tell that the substance was squirming on its own as if searching for food. Ectoplasm? No way. My heart was still racing.

'Researcher Confirmation Complete. Cross Check Conducted: 99.8% Match. While Minor Abnormality has been Detected Due to Influence From the Phenomenal Realm, it has been Identified as an Informational Entity. Henceforth, The Appropriate Information Shall be Recorded Under SumTotal Model Information Body Σ01145782-227-4567897'

A third party's voice resounded low and somber. I was surprised. Unlike the witch, the voice belonged to an older man.

"... Who? What? Where?"

There wasn't anyone around besides the witch and myself. Despite that, the voice continued uninterrupted.

'Physical Interference Level 3. Plenipotentiary Power Holder Requests for The Researcher to take Immediate Action.'

"... Understood. Shifting to Immediate Action"

The witch held up her staff.

"What sort of action? What are you going to do? Are you fighting? Is this a battle? It's a battle, right?"

"....."

I was ignored.

“Your... magic... err, what can it...?”

What exactly was I expecting? With some strange switch flipped, even I couldn't say myself.

“Ferula. Shamanic Field Driver, Stand By”

As if in response, the mechanical staff's lamp lit up. Was this staff Ferula? Nonsense. A part of me knew it was nonsense. But that didn't mean I suddenly understood what I was supposed to do; I continued to spectate with my foot sewn halfway up a step.

The witch, on the other hand, was quick to move.

Clambering a few steps higher than the landing, she stuck out her staff towards the spiritual body (the mysterious voice called it an informational entity) squirming in the third-floor corridor.

“I see!” I understood then and there.

She planned to shoot some absurd magic projectile from the head of that stick. It's that voice. She's a magical girl.

I hurriedly bounded my way up to the landing and cautioned the witch. I got the feeling something bad would happen if I didn't.

“H-hey! If you fire off something so dangerous here...!”

The school would fall apart, but... there I was, my heart racing at the prospect of an end to my normal life.

“Hey, witch!”

“... If you value your life, stand down, resident of the Phenomenal Realm.”

Those were the first words the witch ever said to me.

“Phenomenal Realm?”

“Informational bodies create physical influence by cracking into the logical rules of their target. A resident of the Phenomenal Realm with no protection has no way to defend against it.”

“I don't get a single thing you're saying.”

Truth be told, I had a general grasp. But understanding too fast felt a bit off, so I was acting just a little flustered.

“Spell-based attacks utilize the mutual deviation's permeating effect to convert pure heat into parsable information. There will be no physical influence.”

Another mechanical beep from the staff. Could that be the signal it

was done charging?

Adjusting the angle of her staff, she fixed it in the center of the drifting haze.

“Commence attack—”

I immediately protected my face with both hands. The blast wave I expected never came. I was sure there would be flames, or some wind, or at least a bit of a light show.

No physical influence. Word for word, there wasn’t a single visible phenomenon.

The haze remained zigzagging as healthily as ever.

“Hey... are you done yet? It’s kinda still there... that informational entity of yours.”

“Mission failed.” She haphazardly threw out.

“Say what?”

‘Researcher, SumTotal Model Information Body Σ01145782-227-4567897’s State has been Confirmed as Irregular. Stimulation through Spell Offense has Raised Physical Interference Level to Seven. Plenipotentiary Power Holder Advises for Immediate Evacuation.’

That exceedingly somber voice came out with some exceedingly dangerous-sounding lines.

“H-hey, I just heard retreat. Isn’t that kinda bad?”

The witch looked at me head-on.

“Resident of the Phenomenal Realm, you will be coming with me.”

“Come or not, I’ve got some stuff to... fine, got it.”

“... This way.”

The witch grabbed my arm and dragged me down the stairs. I was back on the second floor, en route to the first—

“Halt, resident of the Phenomenal Realm.”

“I’ve got a name, and it’s Satou Ichirou,”

I quickly shut my mouth. From the side of the first floor, a separate haze—informational body was approaching.

“Then here.”

She pulled me down the second-floor corridor. The school building had two sets of stairs. It was possible to escape from the other side.

We ran side by side a while. The haze in question showed no signs of pursuit. Her feet came to a stop. The corridor was just a tad too long to cross full speed, and she leaned her weight against her staff as she got her breathing in order. Her face was touched by a tint of red, making the impression she gave off somewhat younger.

"We must get moving. Stay close."

This time, we were walking.

"Say... if I get caught by that informational entity, what happens?"

"Your original form and nature will be lost."

"Y-you mean..."

Then I was totally in a life-threatening situation. This was far more serious than I thought.

"This is totally the right time for me to get angry and say, don't drag me into anything crazy."

"The Researcher had no part in your involvement. That is the fault of your lack of crisis-aversion abilities and foresight."

"How could anyone be expected to foresee a witch in the school at night? In the first place, who are you?"

"....." She chose silence.

"Normally, a security guard's all you should expect here."

On that train of thought, there was one point I did notice.

"Say. By the way, were you fine getting through the school's security sensors?"

It wouldn't be strange for there to be some mechanical security. If such abnormality was disclosed to the general public... we'd be right at the clima... no, I mean, it would make for a huge ruckus.

"Not only in the front entranceway, there are also sensors stationed on every first-floor window. Additional sensors have been confirmed stationed around a portion of important sections."

"The first floor...? I came in through the first-floor boys' toilet."

My blood ran cold at a realistic danger.

"Then be at ease." The witch nonchalantly said. "The researcher did too."

"So you're the one who pulled out the window!"

"That is why the security system did not activate."

“Whadaya mean?”

“All electronic security systems in this building have been seized. That is why the existence of a resident of the phenomenal realm failed to trip up any sensors.”

“You seized them? How?”

She lightly held up her mechanical staff.

“With spellcraft,”

So it was a collaboration of magic and machinery.

“it is simple to seize control of a purely mechanical primitive sensor.”

“... I understand what you’re saying, but... that explanation won’t work on anyone else.”

I could only accept it so easily being who I was.

“This matter shall never come to the notice of any residents of the phenomenal realm. In this realm where no mana converters, let alone magical powers exist, no one is able to achieve visual confirmation of The Researcher.”

“I can see you just fine.”

The witch’s face drew close.

Her face, pretty like a masterpiece of glass, felt so perfectly crafted that when she closed in expressionlessly, it packed a perfect punch.

“W-what’s your problem?”

“Those eyes.”

“My eyes? What about them? Are you going to say I have mystic eyes or something?”

“.....” She left about two seconds of pause. “Why do you know about the mystic eyes?”

“No, I was just making stuff up.”

“I am convinced. I have heard that magecraft once existed in the phenomenal realm. The Researcher shall henceforth regard Phenomenal Realm Resident A as a possessor of mystic eyes.”

She regarded me. It did seem I was a chosen human somewhat different from the others, and that was just swell.

“That’s all well and good, but... I have a name, and it’s Satou Ichirou. Quit it with the Phenomenal Realm stuff. It makes me feel

all itchy.”

“Understood. Phenomenal Realm Resident A shall receive the designation of Satou Ichirou.”

“... You can just call me Satou or Ichirou.”

“Ichirou.”

“Y-yeah.”

Called Ichirou without warning, my heart skipped a beat. When was the last time a girl called me by name.....

“Ichirou, we will descend the stairs and escape from the first floor boys’ bathroom. Understood?”

“Got it... ah, but I came here to get my textbook.”

“Your textbook and your life, choose which one you value more.”

“... Well my life, of course, but,”

“Then follow.”

The witch briskly descended the stairs.

Just who in the world was she, anyway? The staff and getup looked authentic, and I could tell she wasn’t acting on a whim. There were few out there who would pull such an elaborate prank. She wasn’t fake. And if she was real, that would mean—

“Hey... are you really from another world.”

“Classified.”

Could’ve seen that one coming. She was acting covertly, after all.

“That aside, you saved me back there, didn’t you?”

“... I am obligated to prevent phenomenal realm casualties as long as it is within the realm of possibilities.”

“I see. Whatever the case, thank you. I just thought I’d say that.”

“It matters not. Looking at the result, I have come upon the beneficial phenomenon of an encounter with a possessor of mystic eyes. If I am to gain your assistance, searching for the dragon terminal will become easier.”

“Yet another piece of grand-sounding jargon. Could you tell me what—?”

‘Researcher. Warning from Plenipotentiary Power Holder.

Disclosure of Information to a Resident of the Phenomenal Realm is punishable by Disciplinary Action.’

The shapeless middle-aged voice.

“Whoa, there it is again!”

“Offering Explanation to Plenipotentiary Power Holder. There is a high possibility the resident of the phenomenal realm in question is an essential factor. I request a special exception to investigate and settle this case.”

‘Request Denied. This Search is Fully Possible for The Researcher to Execute Alone.’

“Until the reason prior informational entity was able to nullify our attack is identified, it is appropriate to think that the situation has changed. Taking the management of the irregular into consideration, gaining the cooperation of a bearer of mystic eyes will stabilize the success rate of any strategy.”

A long silence.

‘..... As a Temporary Measure, the Plenipotentiary Power Holder permits The Researcher’s Interference with the Phenomenal Realm. However, Interference Level Must be Kept at Level Three.’

“Understood.” The enigmatic conversation ended.

“I was wondering where that was coming from, but is it that?”

I looked at the witch’s chest. On the inside of her robe, hung at her far-too original inner collar, a large silvery-metallic pendant. The voice was coming from there.

“This is ‘Plenipotentiary Power Holder Credétat’. In order to execute this mission alone, a pseudo-intelligence and transmission interface granted all authority in regards to the operation by the ‘Central Assembly’.”

“Hmm, so it’s like an AI voice.”

And as that went on, we arrived at the boys’ bathroom.

“The Researcher orders for Ichirou to halt.” The witch pointed with a grave face. “The window has been replaced.”

I took a peek too. It was firmly in place.

“It wasn’t there when I came in.”

Meaning the security guard put it back? The moment I thought that, a single guard exited one of the bathroom stalls, his hand tightening his undone belt.

“Hm? W-who’s there’!? A thief!?”

A flashlight was shined our way.

The witch was quick to move. Stuffing a hand into her bosom, she took out a small spherical object and threw it into the room. The orb burst into a large mass of smoke. A smoke bomb.

“What!? Dammit!”

In no time at all, the room was buried in the smoke. The effects were only amplified in a sealed space. Shutting the door to the restroom, the witch yanked my arm and burst into a sprint. A shrill noise shriek echoed from the fire alarm. At this point, it was finally a huge ruckus.

“Crap, that was a guard!”

“The first floor is dangerous. I advise an escape from the second floor.”

“Why the second!?”

“There are no security mechanisms on the second floor, making escape a simple task.”

Oh really? Well, if a witch is saying it... what bothered me most was what terrible thing might happen if the security guard came into conflict with that monster from before. When I asked the witch, “The guardian or your life, choose which one you value most,” it foreseeably came to.

Well, I’m human after all. Sorry guard.

Our plan of escape from the second floor immediately collapsed.

“That’s right, the classrooms are kept... locked.”

We couldn’t enter any classroom, they were all firmly locked shut. While we took a look at the second-floor toilets as well, for some reason, the windows were a different style from the first floor and not a size any human could pass through.

“They took bloody safety measures...!”

Consideration for the sensitive teen who might try jumping out a secluded window. If they were going to kill themselves, they might as well use the roof or a classroom, and I’m pretty sure a teenager

would avoid the bathroom, and this really was such a boardroom-decided motion.

“What now, witch?”

There wasn’t any time. The guard from the first-floor bathroom would be on our tail in no time. Either run to the third floor, or get to the other side of the second.

“Hey! Are you these so-called thieves!”

The option of going down the corridor disappeared. From a distant classroom, a guard different from the one who ate the smoke bomb jumped out. Our encounter rate was set too high.

“It’s a different guard! Kinda seems even higher leveled than the previous one! When we still have that monster to worry about!”

“... Unlocked.” The witch coldly pointed out.

“Huh?”

she pointed at the classroom the guard had exited.

“We can enter that classroom. Escape is possible.”

Well, I’m sure it was a possibility, but... a guard, an entity embodying the very notion of suspension was coming from precisely that direction.

“The Researcher requests Satou Ichirou’s assistance.”

The witch spread out her two hands like folding fans. Appearing like a parlor trick in the gaps between her fingers, another eight of those smoke bombs from before. I accepted a handful, four of them. So she wanted my help. She even handed me a lighter.

“Ignite,” as ordered, I set fire to the fuses. We simultaneously threw them toward the guard running at us. Eight orbs’ worth of smoke explosively filled the corridor. There were primary colored smokes of red, blue, and yellow mixed in, completely cutting off my field of vision. The form of the guard coiled by smoke left my vision.

Beep, the mechanical staff emitted an electronic noise.

“Subject Guardian rendered powerless. Commence movement.”

“G-got it.”

In a dash, we plunged towards the guard... meaning into the smoke. None of this was sane by any measure. But with a sermon from some pseudo-intelligence, that nauseous prismatic cloud, an

information monster, a guardian, and the witch in blue, my rationality had taken off somewhere. After we'd made it past the smoke, there was no indication of the guard chasing us. It seems he didn't even notice us passing by his sides.

Upon entering the classroom, the witch immediately threw the window open.

"Escape route secured. All hands promptly prepare for descent."

All hands, she said, despite there being only me.

"Hey, don't you think this height is pushing it?"

The witch nonchalantly pulled a rope ladder from the folds of her robe. I was honestly impressed.

"So that's a fourth-dimensional robe you've got on. It's got everything in it."

Pulling the hood of her robe over her eyes, she gave a small nod.

"... Right."

I climbed down first. It was the first time I had ever used a rope ladder, and the considerable sway frightened me, but I somehow managed to plant my feet on the ground. The witch seemed more accustomed, descending with far more certainty.

"Withdraw."

"What about the ladder?"

"That is a consumable ration of this realm, and will be abandoned as such."

Well, the guard already knew someone was there.

The two of us left the grounds, chose a rarely used road, and quickly sped off.

"Ichirou, this way."

Yanked into the darkness, on the grounds of presumably a tenement building under construction, she forcefully crammed our two bodies in the shadows of the carelessly piled building materials.

"Lay low here until the guardian retreats."

"Y-yeah..."

It was a narrow space. I would be spotted standing, so my knees were bent, but we were altogether stuck together. One of my knees entered the gap between the witch's two legs, while one of hers had

torn into the gap between mine. We were pushed fast together, hip to knee joint.

Awkward.

The witch's heat was conveyed across my thin undershirt. I couldn't think properly in regards to where that was touching.

"S-sorry."

"Instigation of apology unknown."

"Well..."

A silence descended. I could feel a minute go by as an hour. The soft and warm contours pushed against me. The sweet fragrance wafting from her hair made it so blatant she was of the opposite sex I couldn't ignore it. A girl was here. I was pressed against a girl. Press. Girl. Girl. Press. My own lack of experience points was hammered in.

It was impossible to see the state of the school from where we were. It seemed the sounds were our only way to measure the changes. And within that silent moment, my attention couldn't help but rift towards the witch.

"Come to think of it," I hadn't checked one fundamental thing.

"What's your name?"

"Researcher."

"Is that a name? Kinda sounds like a code name."

"More precisely, an individual belonging to the class of 'Researcher'. A carbon-based active body affiliated with the 'Central Assembly'."

"Carbon-based...? Doesn't that just mean human?"

"Only the structure is the same, The Researcher is not a human of this realm. While each unit is numbered for the sake of distinction and that serves as an individual designation, that designation is highly classified and improper to disclose."

"So a human from another world."

My heart was already racing, I was at the edge of my seat.

"The Researcher was dispatched to this world to recover the 'Dragon Terminal'."

"Dragon Terminal!" The irrational sensor still nesting within me went off like crazy. "What's that?"

“There are records that dragons once existed in this world as well. However, in the present era, they are largely believed to be extinct.”

“Are you talking about dinosaurs?”

“Different from so-called birds and reptiles, it refers to a general higher-dimensional being boasting intelligence. Wandering from dimension to dimension, they can adapt to any environment, but in rare instance one settles and develops an immunity to a certain plane, their existence is assimilated and affixed in the form of matter. Within a material dragon dwells near infinite energy and highly condensed logic information; they can be used as a multipurpose device to output stable results given special inputs.”

“So in short, it’s some crazy computational device.”

“That is an exceedingly rudimentary understanding, but as an irrational existence of the phenomenal realm, it is an adequate way to conceptualize it.”

“You’re searching for a dragon’s corpse.”

“The notion of a corpse is inadequate. The ability to develop immunity is by no means a rare quality of a carbon-based active body. Even in the phenomenal realm, there are those who possess forms and functions to endure the most extreme of environments for extended durations and reproduce once the environment has improved. Therefore, in this instance, it should be expressed that its activity level has reached a dormant state and—”

“Yeah, got it, fine, I get it. I used the wrong term, cut me some slack here.”

“It is already known that the thought patterns of residents of the phenomenal realm are ruled by illogical trend. It is untrue that the researcher raised any objection to Ichirou’s inappropriate understanding, an explanation was merely offered upon sensing the necessity to prevent a conversation from moving forward under false pretenses.”

“Yeah, fine, it’s alright. Don’t worry about it. It’s just a figure of speech.”

I always found myself in a fluster when faced with those large, almost circular eyes.

“How about you just pick out all the important stuff, and describe it vaguely so even a resident of the phenomenal realm can understand?”

“Understood. Henceforth, the general gist of the main topics shall be extracted and the conversation will be attempted with terminology appropriate for a phenomenal being.”

“Well thanks, I guess.”

Just what sort of girl did I run into, anyway?

“Forget all that, what am I supposed to call you? It would be nice if you had some nickname.”

“A carbon-based active body affiliated with the ‘Central Assembly’ does not require a pet name.”

“But I require one. Do you have anything in mind?”

The witch stared at me.

“... Nothing, The Researcher lacks the ability of extraction. It is impossible to self-supply a pet name.”

“Then I’ll give you one.”

Let’s see. She’s a solemn mage, so... Soma? Yeah, how about Soma? And when it comes to Soma, there’s that famous Vedic ritual elixir—

“Wait, that reeks of pretentious!”

“What’s wrong, Ichirou? Have your cognitive functions been damaged?”

“No, I just reaffirmed how my very existence reeked of pretentiousness...”

The witch touched her nose to my neck.

“It has been determined that Ichirou does not smell.”

“.....”

I was frozen solid for around three seconds.

“I-I don’t mean I actually smell, I mean, there’s this psychological self-loathing that...”

“The Researcher is unable to comprehend such vague philosophical notions.”

I found the notion of sniffing the member of the opposite sex you were stuck to to be far more incomprehensible.

“It’s just a pet name, but why not keep it simple and go with Risa?”

Risa the Researcher.”

I figured something terrible would happen if I thought too hard about it, so I decided to bring a conclusion from somewhere close.

It was a name, for what it’s worth. Shortened form of Marissa.

“It does not matter. The only one who will use the name is Ichirou.”

“Sounds lonely if you put it like that... but, well, Risa it is.”

“Understood. Risa has been registered as a simple identification name.”

A while of silence continued after that. My bottom was finally starting to hurt when the witch abruptly stood to her feet.

“... Eep!”

With an unexpectedly cute yelp, she tripped and fell over me. It appeared something had caught the edge of her outfit.

“Are you okay? You can put your hands on my shoulders.”

“... Proposal accepted.”

With both hands firmly on my shoulders, Risa leaned her weight onto me. With that alone, I was led to feel just a little happy. I sure am simple, aren’t I.

“We should get moving. Disable your suspension mode.”

“Do I look like I have one...”

The area was quiet. There wasn’t any particular clamor from the school’s direction.

An intruder was spotted and a smoke bomb was even thrown. It must have made for considerable turmoil. And yet, it had sunk back to an uncanny level of silence.

The two of us arbitrarily walked out onto the road.

“What are we going to do now?”

“We are going to part ways.”

“Huh? But wasn’t I... the possessor of something or another?”

“In order to avoid the lowering of the mission’s efficiency by intervention, the holder of plenipotentiary power did nothing more than temporarily place the one known as Satou Ichirou under jurisdiction.”

“Is that how it works?”

“That necessity has disappeared. Ichirou will now return to his life

in the phenomenal realm.”

“... I see.”

It would be a lie to say I didn't feel disappointed. Having my mood forcibly dampened was harsh. Risa turned her back upon informing me of our parting. The moment I saw that small back, I thought I had to protect her.

“Ah, I'll help out.”

Those receding feet stopped.

“I have some sort of power, don't I? That means I should be of use somewhere.”

“You have witnessed the risk that comes with searching for dragon terminals. That decision is exceedingly ill-advised.”

“I know that... but I,” The feelings I'd sealed away raised some alarm bells.

“I'm still struggling to accept what you called my life in the phenomenal realm.”

“There is no need for acceptance in mere existence.”

“Or you could call it reality.”

“Reality. The term that opposes fiction. Ichirou, do you long for fiction and fantasy?”

The knife of words stabbed into my chest. Not that she had such intent.

“T-that's not all it is. The way I see it, reality's got to be bigger than the world I know. That's why I wasn't so flustered when I saw someone like you. I could accept it.”

“Accept. Does Ichirou accept The Researcher?”

“That's right. I didn't reject you, did I? You helped me out and told me I had power, and, and then...”

I wanted to raise any reason I could. Yet not enough came out to make a pile. All I could do was mouth the most pathetic reason of all.

“... If there's a mystery out there, I want to see it. If there's an extraordinary out there that'll get my heart racing... I want to see it.”

The witch thought behind her emotionless eyes.

“Is that not enough?”

Risa silently turned; her sleeves flapping, she made off in a hurry. I... wasn't even able to chase her. Fastened firmly to the spit, after watching the blue silhouette vanish from my field of view, I was assailed by an overly bloated despondence. As if I was too late, I had gone on too long not using my power... my own patheticness remained, turning to a lingering unease.

“... Tsk.”

I stuffed both hands into my jacket pocket. My left hand came against something hard.

When I pulled it out, I found the medal Risa was wearing. The chain had been broken.

Right, thinking back, at the construction material sight, Risa had collapsed when something got caught up.

On closer inspection, I could see the frayed thread of one of my jacket buttons, on the verge of coming off. So the chain had caught on the button. Did it fall in back then? I stared at the medal on my palm.

In the center of numerous concentric circles, a rosebud had been inlaid in a different material.

What did she call it again? Right, it was the plenipotentiary power holder. A necessity for a witch. An item she should never lose. A valuable she would have no choice but to come back for. Strangely enough, my heart was jumping for joy.

The world wasn't some boring blur. Karaoke, and fashionable clothes, and class hierarchies weren't everything. Unknown to the adults, a miracle the kids were on the verge of forgetting definitely existed. No matter how I denied it, the medal silently handed down judgment. That's right. Nussy wasn't some cheap setup. Skyfish aren't some trick of the light. The Mongolian death worm (this season's cryptid) is still up and kicking somewhere in the Gobi. And more than anything—witches really exist.

Clenching the medal in my hand, I desperately stifled my own delight.

As per usual, the morning classroom was presided over by an enervated air. It set my heart at ease. Not only did we take on a security guard, I thought leaving physical evidence would be cause for concern, but that all melted away.

“Morning Saitou-kun.”

I found the man sitting on my desk, having a nice little chat with the girl who sat to my right, so I gave his back a friendly, “I don’t really care if you sit there, but start hauling when the seat owner is right in front of you,” pat with all my might.

“That smarts. Satou... my bad.”

Saitou dismounted the desk, his back curling up. A small laugh came from the neighboring girl (if I recall, her name was Ozaki).

“So what were you so fired up over?”

“Hey, nothin’ much, just talking about how fun it was to go shopping yesterday...”

“Didn’t you end up like a snowman melting out of abject despair?”

“Hey, just thought Ozaki-san might be a bit interested, and a bit interested in me taking her there.”

So he was hitting on someone with his buttocks spread over my desk.

“That’s all well and good, but if you want to take a girl, you should really go through the right steps. That shop guy from yesterday half-forgot who you were. It was embarrassing as heck for the rest of us.” Ozaki-san laughed again.

On the other hand, Saitou made a sullen face.

“Hey, you’re wrong, I tells ‘ya. We really do know one another.”

“Is hey the only way you can start a sentence?”

As Ozaki-san burst into laughter, Saitou was put at a loss for words. I sent a greeting glance at Kawai and Kobayashi who were present but spacing out. Kawai gave me a two-handed thumbs up, making sure Saitou couldn’t see. Looks like my Saitou teasing was being endorsed. The reason: he was getting too full of himself. Oh, pitiful Saitou. You have a smidgen of my sympathy.

“... Satou, my dude, you’re nasty.”

Something was just added to my name that wasn’t there yesterday.

He sure is weak to pressure. While Saitou fidgeted awhile, he eventually moved over to a different group.

“Satou-kun, did you end up buying anything?”

Ozaki-san asked me.

“This,” I flashed my watch.

“Ah, that’s lovely. How much was it?”

I listed the price.

“Oh, that’s cheap. I might just drop by.”

“The guy who runs the shop is nice.”

“Hmm. I’ll definitely check it out.”

Or so as the conversation bounced, “Oh, you bought a watch, Satou-kun.” On her customary rounds, Kobato-san came at the right time to join in.

“Good morning. I got it at a street stall yesterday, how’s it look?”

“Morning. Nice, that’s nice. I think it’s very nice indeed. Nice and casual, right Ozaki-san?”

“Yeah. I think so too. It was dirt cheap to boot.”

“Wow, an upright vendor. Satou-kun, when you’ve got that equipped, your looks go up by two points.”

“That’s a dubious increase.” I returned with a laugh.

“Not at all~, I think two points is a big improvement. It’s this spring’s must-have accessory.”

“Must have, huh.”

The true must-have was something else. Of course, I couldn’t tell Kobato-san about it, but I kept it on my person. That medal.

A rare accessory that uplifted my mood. While I didn’t equip it, I had it hidden away in my inner pocket. To put it in her terms, it was at least a five-point increase in spirit.

As long as I carried it, I would reunite with that witch one day. Of course, it carried with it my desire to one day plunge into the world of the abnormal.

By the way, ever since I picked it up, the medal showed no intentions of speaking.

“Hey, are you talking about Kume-san’s store?”

Royal Takahashi called over. Now that’s a rare event.

“Yeah, I dropped by with Saitou and the others yesterday.”

“Hmm, so Saitou-kun’s already spreading the news.”

“By the sound of it, you’re the source material.”

“Yeah, Kume-san’s an alumnus of our art club. I ran into his street stall by chance. Hmm, that’s a nice piece. Wasn’t there last time I checked up on it.”

“It’s nice, right? Good sense and all,” Kobato-san eagerly nodded.

“That Kume-san guy recommended it.”

“Yeah, you’ve made a good purchase there. Lucky, Kume-san’s goods are usually one-of-a-kind.”

“But if they weren’t one-of-a-kind, I’m sure it’ll be hard on our mister popular. It won’t start a trend.”

“Sure enough. Looks like you get it.” Takahashi’s expression brightened up.

“What’s this? What are you talking about?”

“The male psyche. I wouldn’t want to double up.”

“Mnn?”

As Kobato-san tilted her head, soothing nutrients spilled into the classroom, filling me with happiness. My luck went up five points.

“Rather, don’t girls feel that way too?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure they do.”

“Mnnnn, I don’t really get it!”

Kobato-san was puffing her cheeks so I answered with a wry smile.

“If everyone wears the same things, won’t it feel awkward? Is how it goes.”

“Oh, character overlap, right~. Yeah, yeah, I totally get you.”

I’m pretty sure that meant something completely different but...

“But when you think about our uniforms, it feels nice that everyone’s wearing the same thing. I was in the literary club in middle school, so I never experienced the feeling. I always wanted to try it out~.”

There was something I should have noticed by that point.

“I’m sorry, I’ll be off for a bit.”

With the conversation growing harder to enter, Ozaki-san stood from her seat and ended up leaving the classroom. I should have

directed the talks toward her. That was my bad. Judging by Takahashi's good-natured response, he evidently felt no guilt. To add to that, Kobato-san similarly simply fluffily waved her hand. Those blessed with human relations are unable to understand the urge to get away. Indeed, truly royal.

"Satou-kun, you know, we were planning to go stopping by the station today, but want to come with?"

"Huh?"

Now that was a surprise. Contrary to how he treated everyone with courtesy, when it came to hanging out, Takahashi only ever acted with close friends. If such a man called out to me, that meant he might eventually invite me to his group.

How could this be? It's head hunting.

"Well... is it really okay if I go?"

"Of course, totally okay."

"Then I think I'll do just that."

"Welcome to the team, Satou-kun. It's the first time we'll ever hang out~."

"Y-you're right."

Just what was it, this supernatural luck I was having today. I got the feeling my life was suddenly taking a fun turn.

"The teacher's going to get here soon. Could you give me your number later?"

"See you later~."

Takahashi and Kobato-san returned to their seats. It was a few minutes before class, but before the sense of being new students wore off, it was the default for everyone to wait on standby at their own station. Only Ladies' Satou one chair forward and to the left remained missing.

Despite the fact the homeroom teacher hadn't arrived, the classroom had sunk to silence. This atmosphere would definitely crumble away within the next month. And by the time it collapsed, the class's human interrelation diagram would be largely completed. A little more than a week from commencement, I was blessed with the chance to join the vanguard. Upon conversing with

me, apparently Takahashi came under the impression that I was a quick wit. Depending on how things rolled, perhaps Saitou would be pushed aside and I would enter the circle to fill the vacancy. I felt a sense of accomplishment. But that wasn't the real me. It was wonderful to be able to play with Kobato-san, my apprehensions of the distant future foresaw a retribution for rushing through the political game, weighing down heavily on me. If I interacted with the vanguard, I would exist as an unfavorable comparison, and would constantly have to keep mind of my surroundings. I would also have to take good care of my relationship with Kawai and Kobayashi. It was no easy task.

Maaan, if only I was handsome. No, the more important thing was charisma. If only I had the aura to draw people to me, even without self-interest, I could live a fun life.

By the way, aura comes from the Latin for wind. The English word originally meant a gentle breeze, but now indicates the spiritual energy emitted from one's character. Of course, it isn't something that actually exists. It's generally used as a substitute for charisma and the feeling one gives off. While it's invisible to the eye, there's nothing out there that can influence people more.

Someone who could become the leader of the class would have to emit a strong aura. Take Takahashi, for instance.

But when it came to the greatest I had ever seen—I gripped the medal in my pocket—the witch from last night was the greatest. That was something else.

I wanted to meet her again. Perhaps my wish would be granted in the near future, I held a faint hope.

The front door of the silent classroom slid open as the witch in a blue robe brazenly strut in. If I had been drinking milk at the moment, I'd have undoubtedly done a spit take.

Who'd have thought it would come true a second after I thought it.

The witch had infiltrated the classroom that morning.
Everyone's reaction was a shade of surprise.

Without any exaggeration, all eyes were gathered upon her. Wholly undeterred by those looks, the witch systematically surveyed the room. Here eye alignment locked perfectly onto me.

“Hold on a second...”

I did wish to meet her. I carried the medal in remembrance. But at that very moment, my mind was compromised of nothing but danger signals.

“Satou Ichirou. The data was correct in that you were stationed in this platoon.”

This time, the attention was on me. The curtain rose with my name as the opening credit. My heart rebounded explosively.

“No, my name is... Satou... but... I’m not... really... sure about that right now.”

I tried standing to explain myself, but all that came out was incomprehensible groans.

The witch approached. I wanted to flee. I couldn’t move. She stopped before my eyes. It was undoubtedly the blue witch. My head sporadically boiled over. My thoughts wouldn’t organize. My arms dubiously shook. It was a stiffness befitting the rising star of the creeper industry (as if), and even I could clearly tell I was repeating comical motions. I felt the contours of my face might fall limp. Of all else, with my own power, I couldn’t control the spontaneous shaking of my lip. In that very moment, I was an anime that had run out of production budget. The very incarnation of shoddy animation.

“What’s all this then?” “What is she wearing?” “Who?” “You know her, Satou?” “Your girlfriend?” “Wow~, amazing! That’s so coool~!” “Nuts.” “Cosplay?” “A joke?”

... I must have imagined Kobato-san’s innocuous voice mixed among the wild flight of speculation. But a large majority of my classmates were weirded out. Cringing, as they call it.

What? Why? Did I do something? The medal, a part of my brain whispered softly. The witch came to get it back. Then as long as I returned it, so too would peace return. I immediately put that plan in action, thrusting the artifact out towards the witch.

“A-are you looking for this!?”

But with one glance at the medal,

“... Plenipotentiary Power Holder, report on investigation into Satou Ichirou.”

That mysterious voice resounded across the classroom.

‘Investigation Report: It has been Made Clear that Satou Ichirou Boasts an Adequate Nature to Serve as a Collaborator’

The classroom returned to silence once more.

“... The heck was that?” a lone cold response output.

The danger signals had already reached max. At this rate, my normal life was set to collapse. Of all things, why did it have to be school in the middle of the day? Why couldn’t she measure out a time where we could be alone?

Her form that had been so bewitching last night had become so painful to look at in broad daylight. What a peculiar reversal. My classmates had identified Risa as a rampant cosplayer. And I was an acquaintance of this cosplayer. If I was wrapped up in such an incident, there would be no conceivable way to spend my time free of rumor.

Only one, I noticed there was a single way to return alive.

Right, if I could prove this witch was the ‘real thing’. If I could demonstrate this plenipotentiary power holder was a mechanical intelligence from another world. If I could establish the existence of monsters called informational entities.

The minuses should convert to plusses.

“Umm, everyone please look at this!” I held it high for the class to see.

“The truth is—”

My fingers strongly gripping the medal pressed up against what seemed to be a button.

“Huh?”

I almost dropped the medal that had suddenly begun to change in my hand. Barely catching it by the chain, the piece leisurely spun in the air.

With such timing, the medal spoke.

‘Miracle, dress uuuuuuuuup!’

Not bearing the slightest resemblance to that somber adult voice, an outrageously anime-esque exclamation. The rosebud inlay bloomed into a large flower revealing a glimmering dome portion smack dab in the center.

Piroriropiroriro♪

A synthetic chip-tune discharged.

‘Dress Chaaaaaaange, Evening Styyyyyyle!’

Along with that exclamation, the glistening heart of the flower lit up in seven colors. If there was any requiem played on the road down to hell, I had always believed it would be a stately, classical tune. I had never doubted that fact. Yet now, all my beliefs had been smashed to smithereens. My soul was being dragged to Sheol by the radiant beats of an anime at full throttle.

A while passed before the uproar died down and the medal reverted to its original form. The back kindly featured the logo of the production and distribution company.

“It’s freaking BANDAI!!”

A superdreadnought class toy maker of the real world whose name required no introduction. It was quite a surprise to learn that BANDAI was actually the god of death.

“... That’s the magic medallion from the female-targeted anime, ‘Dress Idol Yuna,’ airing on Sundays from eight thirty to nine... I watched it when I was a kid... Don’t tell me Satou was an otaku?” I don’t know who, but someone offered an explanation. An expert explanation at that.

Meaning. The fact it was a toy meant— would that make it all a lie? Where did the lies end and the truth begin? I wasn’t optimistic enough to think the medal was the only lie about it.

Presumably all of it. The witch, and the other world, and the monster, it was all lies.

“It’s over.”

My school life. My high school debut. My peace. It was all demolished. My premonitions of a school life were thrown into a cross-cutting shredder, torn into such tiny pieces that not even a

first-rate stalker would be able to steal a read.

“Unit Identification Satou Ichirou has been designated the position of slave to serve in the mission of searching for the dragon terminal. The will of the network is transmitted to every activity body, and the will of all activity bodies become one dispersed across the network. We pray that you will be a good tool.”

Holding up a staff like Moses as he parted the red seas, the witch grandly declared. I was no longer able to offer any reaction. My soul had long since sunk into a deep darkness.

From what I heard later, it seems I had fainted on my feet.

“Ahahah, wait for me, witch!”

“Ichirou, over here, over here~.”

The witch and I, at the school at night (for some reason, the hallway had become a field of flowers), our hands were linked as we were in the midst of fleeing from the guardian. A beautiful meeting straight out of a painting, an adventure to set one’s heart on edge, a dramatic escape... and who could forget the wonderful memory of that cosplay witch destroying my life the next morning!

“AAaaaah!”

Unable to endure the recapitulation of my fear, I opened my eyes with a violent convulsion. The relief only lasted an instant, the sadness following soon behind.

“... Urgh... dammit... dammit all...”

Burying my face in the pillow, I sobbed sorrowfully in shame. How pathetic, how embarrassing.

In the time it took for the peculiar scent to alert me I wasn’t at home but the infirmary, I wept some more.

“The infirmary... I see... was it all a dream?”

“Nah, all real.”

So spoke the large two chesticles resting on the edge of the bed.

“What a surreal reality.”

No, that’s wrong. The one who spoke was the owner of that chest. A woman in a lab coat. By my estimation, somewhere in her early

twenties. Her fluffy-looking short perm was dyed a clean blonde. Glasses that were supposed to be a symbol of intellect for some reason granted her a mischievous impression.

“What are you doing here?”

“Seeing how you hold up. I’m the nurse.”

Standing on her knees, she leaning her body forward so her weight rested on the bed. The bottom half of the frame formed by her folded arms was filled with bust. Almost like a relief. I could declare with certainty that there was no conceivable way those puppies were any lower than a ninety. The impact of seeing them up close could practically be considered violence. To the extent of what I could glean from the silhouette, not a trace of brassiere. While she must have had on a camisole or something, the trouble came in the fact that her chest held a fierce impetus to be freed from its oppression.

“You were watching? The whole time?”

“Yeah, had nothing better to do. I had to wipe your drool too.”

I hurriedly wiped my mouth.

“Don’t you have a job to do?”

“Yes, and I’m doing it. I was examining a student who suddenly fainted.”

“Did I... faint?”

Admittedly, I did have a vague understanding I wasn’t dreaming.

“I heard you fell unconscious in class. You were carried over here, and it’s around fifth period right now. They said you didn’t hit anything, so I let you get some rest. Do you want me to contact your parents?”

“No, I’m not hurting anywhere... fifth period?” I was out way too long.

“Did you stay up late last night or something?”

“Ah, right...”

I was feeling so exhilarated last night, I couldn’t get to sleep.

“If you can stand, come over here for a bit.”

The school nurse called me over to a steel desk.

It did seem she had to write something up in regards to any student

brought in. My name, my class, I gave a simple explanation of the circumstances.

I tried to play off the witch issue, but she bit on.

“... I don’t get how a girl you know coming to see you put you in a state of shock. I do recall an incident where an outsider marched into school this morning, but why did that knock you out?”

If I seriously was a quick wit, I’d have been able to redirect the conversation, but in the end, it was a false front. Unable to think of any clever excuse, I covered up only the events of last night, and honestly divulged the rest.

“Hmm. So in short, she came all dressed in cosplay.”

“Yes. When everyone learned that I knew her... I knew they might think we’re one and the same, err...” I was infected.

“I get you, I get you. This is an important time for you. Of course, you’d like to avoid anything crazy.”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Yeaah, got it. I’ll process it so it doesn’t become too big of a deal, okay? You can get back to class. If you start feeling ill, you can take off in the middle of lessons, just come and talk to me.”

Just as I’d given my thanks and was about to vacate the infirmary, the sleeve of my uniform caught on a small seal case on the table, dropping it onto the floor. The lid came off spilling its contents.

“Sorry, I’ll get that.”

“Could you?”

When I burrowed under the desk, the corner of my eye caught a glance up her skirt. The forbidden glimpse just beyond the indecent huddled flesh of her inner thighs deformed by her sitting posture. The chamber of secrets (don’t sue me). Why was she barefoot, anyway? Seriously, why was she barefoot? Would you call this feeling love... heck no, it’s just lust. It did seem I was becoming a nervous wreck.

Severing all worldly desires, I devoted my undivided attention to the search.

“Found it. What is this anyway?”

“You can’t have it.”

“... I never said I wanted it.”

To explain it in short, it was a metallic stick. Around the size of a human finger. While it was decorated, yearly wear had shallowed out the engravings and I couldn't make out what it was supposed to be.

“It's used as a good luck charm. They're famous around these parts-for girls, specifically. I got it from a kid who frequents the infirmary.”

“Hmmm.”

A good luck charm was a sort of spell, so along that vein it was a ritual ornament, in a sense. A real one.

“Then I'll be getting back. I've got to at least attend sixth period.”

The bell for sixth period chimed.

“Nyahaha, now that's unfortunate.”

Her intonation made it out as completely someone else's business. I lost all motivation to get back to class.

I returned after class. I ate some leftovers from the nurse's lunch and killed some time. Homeroom had already ended to give way to blank nothingness.

As I approached the classroom, my anxiety multiplied.

Just what sort of evaluation had they handed down upon me? There was no way my shocking drama with the cosplay woman hadn't become a subject of conversation.

Settling my resolve, I stepped into the classroom. The remaining students looked at me at once.

Two girls I'd never spoken to before, also around six boys. Kawai and Kobayashi were there as well, talking with poor sandwich Nakamura. All eyes looking at me seemed to want to say something, but no one actually spoke up. The class's sole delinquent alone played it apathetic, reading some magazine to himself.

Takahashi's group was nowhere to be seen.

Considering the circumstances, that was to be expected.

For now, I just wanted to know what happened after that. When I

turned towards Kawai and the others, they awkwardly took their eyes off of me. With transparent bearing, their conversation restarted. Mn, was a barrier just erected?

“Still, Nakamura, you really have it hard.”

“Right, right, can’t help but laugh sometimes. Got to look forward to the next seating change.”

“You guys are still better off. I’m right by the teacher’s desk.”

Regardless of the fact I was nearby, the talk continued as if I wasn’t there. The chill spreading from my spin across my body numbed me to the tips of my finger.

No doubt about it. These three were emitting a ‘don’t talk to me’ aura.

But why? I didn’t even have to think about it. There was only one possible reason. I got that part, but why was the perpetrator of this mess nowhere to be seen? At the end of my mulling, I decided it was better than doing nothing, and tried talking to Kawai.

“Hey, about that woman from this morning. Do you know where she—”

“Satou, the teacher said he wanted you to go to the counseling room when you got back.”

Kobayashi’s response could be expressed as flat-out rejection. I could no longer follow up my words. Should I ask “Why so cold, aren’t we friends”? The answer is no. That’s what you should never do at any costs.

That exchange was plenty to tell there was no present possibility of reconciliation. While my unsteady footing seemed hopeless, if I clung on any further, I would be forcing them to come out with the definitive words.

Those definitive words would be my end. That was the sort of space school was. That’s why whatever could be left ambiguous should be kept ambiguous. The power to read the mood is indispensable.

“Got it, thanks.”

A swift retreat. I could just barely hear, “We’ve grown a little distant, but we can still talk some.” I successfully maintained the front lines. I felt like crying.

Just as I'd prepared to be off and was leaving the classroom, I crashed into one of my classmates.

Well maintained hair, straight and long. He was tall, and a looker as far as I could tell. But for some reason, he was a weirdo who insisted to be the only one wearing a white uniform: I had thoroughly avoided all conversation with him.

"Sorry."

I quickly apologized to be on my way, but for once in a blue moon, he actually spoke up to me.

"Satou Ichirou."

"Me?"

"A storm is coming."

"... You think it's going to rain."

"Fufufu, the day you understand is not long to come.

Fwahahahahah!"

He entered the classroom with a grand laugh. That theatrical attitude, it grate against my old wounds.

The counseling room was a space set aside for counseling and secret discussions. The fact we employed a full-time counselor was one of our school's selling points, but I'd never had the chance to use them.

"It's Satou. I'm coming in."

"This is Dorisen. Go right ahead."

Dorisen. Our homeroom teacher's nickname. Our generation had nothing to do with it, it was our seniors a year up who gave it to him. Originally, his tendency to be a heavily doting husband had him teased as Lovebird: oshidori fuufu; that eventually became Oshidori Sensei which was shortened to Dorisen, apparently.

But who in the world would actually use a nickname their students gave them on themselves?

"Pardon me."

Imagining something like an interrogation room, I timidly stepped in. There was no cold feeling. An expensive-looking carpet and

green curtains. A low table and sofa set. Alongside a television and playback device, there was even a coffee maker. I had never imagined such a space on school grounds.

A table across from me, Dorisen had taken a firm seat in the center of a sofa for three.

“Well, have a seat. You don’t have to be so stiff.”

“I see,” I sat on his urgings.

“I heard you passed out, but are you doing alright?” Dorisen poured some coffee into a cup.

“No problems to report. I hear you’re the one who carried me, I have to apologize for that.”

“It’s love, Satou.”

“Hah?”

“My love as an educator. So you don’t have to worry about it. It is my pleasure to race through adolescence with you.”

“..... Uh-huh.”

I was beginning to get the feeling his name also included the implication of Dreamer Sensei.

“So anyways. About why I called you here. Do you have any guesses?”

“It’s not about me fainting this morning?”

“There’s that, and a little bit of something else.”

I tried thinking but wasn’t hitting on anything.

“I don’t know.”

“Alright, then I’ll be a man and come right out with it. But you should keep this in mind. No matter what happens, I’m on your side. Me and you, we’re tied by the tight bonds of education!”

“..... Uh-huh.”

In all my life, that was the first time I ever had to repeat the one and only peerless interjection for when one couldn’t receive the conversation, “Uh-huh” over such a short interval. T-this man knows his stuff! ... Was the air he gave off.

“There was an intruder in school yesterday, and it turns out it was you, Satou~, well I’ll be.”

I did a spit take with my half-finished coffee.

“Am I really that obvious!?”

“I mean, you showed up right on camera.”

So there was a security camera...

“You’ve got it wrong, I just came to get my textbook... so I snuck into the school.”

“I thought it would be something like that. Now about the other intruder.”

“That unrepentant cosplayer?”

“Right, her. That girl, you see, she’s one of our students. She’s in our class, and her name’s Satou just like you. You remember how we have a student who’s been absent since day one?”

“Y-you’re kidding me.”

Satou? Ladies’ Satou of the empty seat? That cosplay woman?

“From one Satou to another, have you known one another long?”

“You’re wrong! I first met her that night at school.”

“It seems you used fireworks to cause some trouble with our guards, and as both culprits were students of my class, the matter was left in my hands.”

“I’m sorry.” I obediently lowered my head.

“Alright. And so, I’ll overlook it this time. I’ll believe in your sincerity that you’ll never repeat the mistake. However, in exchange, there’s something I want you to do.”

“A request?” If it was the price to look the other way, there was no way I could deny it.

“It’s about your accomplice, the other Satou.”

“Come to think of it, where did she go off to? Has she been carted off to juvi yet?”

“She disappeared just like that. She’s always been like that. When I went to pay a home visit, she was gone the moment I took my eyes off of her. It’s almost in the realm of paranormal.”

“That’s a skill that sounds convenient for crime. So what’s your request.”

Dorisen gave me his finest smile.

“I want you to become friends with that girl—Satou Ryouko.”

“I refuse. Does my suspension start tomorrow?”

“Eeh? Why!?”

“The plea bargain has been rejected, end of story.”

“It’s not a bargain, it’s a favor, Satou. Mens’ Satou and Ladies’ Satou, you should get along perfectly.”

“Give me a break! Do you even know what sort of woman she is?”

“Her cosplay may be a bit much, but... if she makes a friend, I think she’ll come to school. As a matter of fact, she did.”

“But if I become friends with her, I’m quite sure I won’t be able to be friends with anyone else.”

I realized that was a terrible way to look at it, but it was the reality.

“... Yeaah. Then how about this.” Dorisen made his most radiant smile of all. “I, Dorisen will be your friend.”

“You really are a dreamer sensei!”

“I’m an educator, so I think I have at least five students’ worth of friendship power.”

“Even with those incomprehensible calculations.”

“You don’t come by these education chances often. Satou Ryouko is obstinate in her inattendance. Yet when it was in order to meet Satou Ichirou, she came just like that. The conclusion I must draw is...”

“Is?”

“That crest of the Satou drew you to one another.”

“What’s that even mean?”

“... I thought you were at an age where you would like that sort of thing.”

“What even is the crest of the Satou? Whatever the case, anyone but her.”

“Mmmm, if a request won’t work, I can make it an order. I can appoint Mens’ Satou in charge of Ladies’ Satou.”

“You’ll go that far...”

“Did it work?”

“Definitely not. I don’t want to. She hurts to look at. I hate that sort of LARPing more than anything.”

“Why’s that? Did you have a bad experience with it? Middle school, perhaps?”

With a clang, my head felt it had been smacked with a morning star. “Nn-n-nwaught eth ll! Y-yo-you’re wro!” My creeper genes came out full throttle. “I definitely didn’t LARP and get bullied in middle school.”

“As I thought. I didn’t think you’d be the sort. But it’s because you’re like that, that I want you to understand how she feels.”

It bothered me how he put it, but I didn’t want this to continue.

“I’d rather not. In the first place, I don’t want to get close to her.”

“I’d get it if she was violent, but could you at least try not rejecting her on her attitude?”

“No, if she comes close, I’m sure I’ll reject her the heck of it.”

“Hmmm,” Dorisen offhandedly tossed a document onto the table.

“Ah, sorry, I dropped something.”

With how shamelessly he acted, I hazarded a glance to find the words ‘Record Enclosed: Satou Ichirou’ on the cover. I opened my eyes wide. My student record. At the end, there was a separate entry compiled of a special report.

“Oh my, there’s no way I could ever leak the contents of that document to the other students. If I ever did something like that, my dear, dear student might just be picked on.”

A blatant threat. When he was so bold about it, I didn’t even have the willpower to curse him.

“You’ll accept, won’t you?”

There was no way I could refuse.

The sigh faucet had broken, leaving a constant stream. While I understood it was unbecoming, for now alone, I couldn’t lie to my own feelings.

“Haha...”

Some dry self-derision. Today had shifted from a day of delight to a day to be kicked and tread on.

The classroom was deserted. I sat in my own seat and threw my body over my desk. I didn’t have the motivation to head home, and my playdate arrangements fell through. To add to that, my hopes

for high school had fallen away, banging against every step on the way down. Thinking back, Dorisen's threat was pretty meaningless. My fate had already been sealed. My unfortunate meeting with that sham mage would drop me back down to the very bottom, most likely.

Thirty minutes were required to wring out the insignificant willpower to be on my way.

"... I should go home."

The wind was blowing, spreading the curtain wide into the room. The refreshing spring wind mixed in with the sweet scent of hair. I blankly turned an eye. The blue witch sat on the windowsill.

"Y-you!"

I kicked back my chair. I had journeyed three long years, searching out my sworn foe and here she stood before me— was the feeling I was getting.

"Dragon wave detected," she unerringly, brazenly leaked. "One of the terminals really must be in this building."

"Cut the lies. Your mask's already peeled off."

"Numerous precognitive tests have undoubtedly observed the existence of the dragon terminal."

"You don't have to do that anymore. In the first place, where have you been all this time?"

"Searching independently."

"So you were searching for something that doesn't exist." I sneered.

"... A remarkable deterioration has been detected in Ichirou's behavior."

"Whose fault do you think that is!?"

Satou Ryouko looked the same as ever. A robe and a staff. It was anyone's best guess how she operated covertly, dressed like that. No, no, she was definitely sighted. It's just, no one wanted to get involved, they were too afraid.

"I'll say it right out. You're not a witch from another world. You're just a high school student, the sort of boring plebian you could find anywhere: Satou Ryouko, and no one else!"

With my finger pointed at Ryouko (she didn't deserve an honorific),

I awaited her mental breakdown.

“... Ichirou, it seems you have been subject to wavelength conversion.”

“You’ve got your jargon bases covered. If you think lining up appropriate-sounding words will shut me up, you’re way off.”

“To put it in this realm’s terminology, wavelength conversion is akin to brainwashing. A technique to interfere with the brain waves of a carbon-based activity body to influence their thought pattern.”

“Yeah, yeah, again with that nonsense.”

“If The Researcher reinitializes Ichirou’s brain waves, the problem will be resolved.”

“Hmm. Then if that doesn’t resolve it, you’ll have to admit you’re just some delusional crazy.”

“Negative. The Central Assembly exists, and it is an irrefutable fact that The Researcher is affiliated with the organization.”

This girl, could it be she wasn’t posing, but was actually seriously invested in her delusion?

“Commencing treatment. Sit in this chair and close your eyes.”

She pulled out the end-row chair and put it against the wall.

“No way. You’re wasting your time, and I’m going home.”

“... If after the treatment, there is absolutely no change to your mental state, then accepting your argument is a conceivable possibility.”

“There, you said it. If you accept it, you’ll have to quit it with that crazy cosplay of yours.”

“Very well.”

“And no arguing your way out if I haven’t changed at all.”

“Indeed.”

“Got it.” I sat in the chair and closed my eyes. “Just you try it. That reinitialization of yours.”

It was more than absolute confidence. It was an undeniable fact that this witch was Satou Ryouko. That point alone eliminated any deviation. I had already won the war. After I made her quit cosplaying, how was I going to punish Ryouko? There was Dorisen’s plan to consider, so I was best off making her wear a uniform and

go to school. Admittedly, even if she did wear a uniform, it would be impossible for her to make any friends. Right, if you fail your debut, it's over. I was over as well. But if I could take the assailant down with me, it could serve as some consolation.

"Don't move."

Ryouko's hands locked onto both sides of my face. As she lightly pushed back with them, my head touched against the wall. I grew anxious. Be that as it may, it was already too late. The ritual had begun.

"...!?"

Just as I thought I could hear her breathing up close, in the next instant, it had already been done.

What, you ask? Why of course, a kiss.

"Gnn———!"

I was kissed. Satou Ryouko kissed me. What was that supposed to mean? Why was she kissing me? What were we even talking about before? Something about brainwashing? If the issue at hand was resolved by the lack of evidence, the answer was a kiss.

Incomprehensible.

"Nma, mh..."

My escape route was sealed from the start. The two hands holding my face. And the wall right behind my head. Today's trivia: if the back of their head is against a wall and only a finger is pressed against their forehead, a human is unable to stand.

Leaving behind an excessively erotic breath, Ryouko parted from me.

"....."

I stared dumbstruck a while.

Like hell I'd let her look down on me, I stood. Overlapping myself with the majestic form of Takeda Shingen in my heart, I was going to give it to her harsh.

"Toobabubabubu!"

That was the first time in my life I ever bit my tongue so consecutively.

By the way, "Too bad for you. I haven't changed in the slightest,"

was the plan. No vestige of the original quote was left. My source-text was bastardized. Like a wilting flower arrangement, I crumbled down into the chair. At that moment, my existence was lower than the decorative chrysanthemum placed over a hot bowl of noodles.

“You are currently facing a temporary loss of language function due to reinitialization. You may see it as proof that the treatment was a success.”

“... Kuh”

‘Hehe, boss, your heart pump can’t handle this beat,’ or so my throbbing chest kindly informed me. A novice like myself was immediately set racing. My face was idiotically hot. In contrast, Ryouko showed not the slightest tint of red. She maintained a perfect poker face.

“... That’s playing dirty.”

She used a woman’s weapons. All’s fair in love and war, but seriously.

“In the search for the Dragon Terminal, The Researcher has been set as the master, and Ichirou as the slave. Now that the oath has been completed, Ichirou is obligated to listen to The Researcher’s orders.”

“... Orders again.”

“Be at ease. The Researcher shall not make light of your life. In the event of the mission’s completion, you have a guarantee that you will be promptly released. Additionally, the organization intends to compensate you in local currency.”

She was going to pay me, this girl?

“You’ll go so far in a kid’s play pretend to pay someone money?”

The problem was approaching another dimension. My anger became something of some other dimension.

“As a result of considering the phenomenal world’s emphasis on individual work, the reward has been deemed appropriate.”

“Are you stupid? You’re stupid.”

Why could she throw aside what other humans held valuable so easily?

“That insult holds no logical validity. The researcher’s mode of

operation is determined by the Central Assembly, and as long as the intrinsic differences among individual units are finely regulated, the insult of idiot is inapplicable. While this may run contrary to the decision of the local collaborator enlisted for the mission of finding the Dragon Terminal, as long as Ichirou cannot comprehend the organization's circumstance leading to the dragon terminal's necessity, it should be impossible for him to deliver an all-encompassing verdict."

"More than possible. If you stick money onto it, that's all it'll ever mean to me."

"The Researcher is unable to identify the target of the demonstrative pronoun of 'that'. The output of Ferula fails to decipher the complex mental state of phenomenal residents. Please designate the scope of 'that'."

"Don't screw with me... so thoughtlessly... the money, and the kiss..."

The recompense for foolishness is always paid after the fact. This girl was far too oblivious. When I looked at her, my old wounds ached. It was so painful I couldn't stand to look any longer.

"You're going to destroy yourself. If you end up like that."

"It is a common occurrence for an affiliated activity body to sacrifice their life to further the mission. The same applies to Ichirou."

"Why do I have to lay down my life for your freaking delusions?"

"Ichirou, you know too much. If you were not placed under my patronage, there is a possibility the organization would erase you."

"None at all, the organization itself ain't anywhere. The eliminaters aren't coming."

"There are times the Plenipotentiary Holder issues such orders to a Researcher as well."

"So what? You're going to be following me around forever?"

"Affirmative."

Dorisen's threat. Ryouko's stalker declaration. My naïve notion that the morning's events weren't yet fatal. They all mixed together to form a single solution.

"For the time being... if I find this dragon terminal of yours, my

mission is over, right?”

I was going to be alone anyway. I was going to be ostracized regardless.

“That is correct. It will end.”

“Dragon terminal, eh. I won’t accept some punchline like it doesn’t actually exist. Even if it is a delusion, it might have some other object serving at its core. Can you tell me with absolute certainty that some item corresponding with this dragon terminal of yours actually exists?”

“The Researcher doesn’t know what name the residents of the phenomenal realm have given the dragon terminal. However, if you desire a sample of a real article, I can present it on our next meeting.”

If she would go as far as present it, the target itself would have to exist somewhere. There was an end. If I put my reasons to go with it and my reasons to deny it on the scale, the latter was the winner, but... with all the supports below me crumbling away, in the end, I would find myself in practically the same place: rock bottom. It would be an insignificant profit margin falling short of the decimal point.

“Fine. I’ll help out.”

“Then accept your reward.”

Ryouko fiddled with her staff. In the handle portion, one of those coin dispensers they sold at the bargain store was built in. The small stack of coins became a mound on the palm of her hand. That was what she held out to me.

“Payment.”

A sum fitting of a childish game. How should I put it, it felt like I got angry over nothing.

“... I don’t need your small change.”

I got home at six.

When I reached my room and sunk into the bed, I felt like I might pass out again.

“... Harsh.”

Ryouko spared no time to drag me around school on a search. It was a hellish time.

This was too large to call a blind spot, but even after school, there were plenty of students in the middle of club activities. The sight of me being dragged around by an open cosplayer was witnessed by plenty of students. Far too quickly, I was cursing my own decision. Of course, we didn't find that dragon terminal thing of hers, making for nothing but embarrassment for me, the innocent dragged in. There was definitely something wrong with the world. Would we even find the dragon terminal anytime soon? I felt anxious. If we didn't find it, it seemed likely I'd be on the road of shame a while longer.

“Ichirou, phone,” a call from downstairs.

“Phone?”

Scrambling down, I took the receiver from my mother. I'd only just begun carrying a cell phone so only Kawai and Kobayashi knew my number on it. Neither of them my friends, evidently. Crap, I'm friendless.

“Hello?”

‘Hey it's me, it's me, I need you to deposit an exorbitant sum into my bank account.’

I only knew one person who'd say that.

“I'm hanging up, Shimizu.”

‘Joking, joking. That's no good, Ichirou-kun, didn't I teach you not to snap in normal conversation?’

“... Hah? When did I do that? You've just got terrible timing today.”

In the darkness of my middle school era, if I were to name a single friend, it would have to be Shimizu. He was a student in another class, and the sole person who properly spoke with me even upon knowing I was being bullied. Albeit, he never went as far as to publicly help me (hey what do you think's going to happen if I help? we wouldn't want two bullied students on our hands, he boldly declared), but hidden at it was, he properly associated with me. That alone was cause for celebration.

Without that sufficiency, perhaps I'd never even considered a high school debut. It wasn't enough to say he had a large influence.

'Are you busy?'

"No, just lying in the mud on the verge of death, contemplating my life choices."

'That sounds fun. How about you tell me about it.'

Shimizu's voice bounced. He was enjoying this. He was the sort of hedonist who used the misfortune of others as fuel. I gave him a sum up. Once he'd heard it all, Shimizu sounded satisfied.

'... Well now, that's quite the crazy you've got on your hands.'

"Her aura's amazing. She's got to be nen user."

'They do say nen's the only way to counteract nen, pff.'

He laughed at his own gag. The bastard.

"I'm not even in a pinch, it's already over. My classmates all think I'm one of those."

'It's too early in the year. The dubious equilibrium is easy to collapse.'

"I must be facing retribution for trying to join the vanguard without learning my place."

"Well, don't be so down. Aight, how about some advice from the great and powerful me?"

Shimizu's advice admittedly helped me quite a bit in middle school.

"No, I'm pretty sure even you couldn't work your way out of this one."

'Well say what you want. How about you start by telling me how your class is made up?'

Perhaps talking would be enough to take a load off my mind. Sitting right on the floor of the hall with the telephone, I picked out my words.

"Well first, there's one group of nobles and..."

The morning classroom was in the process of changing into another world.

The moment I entered, the room's idle chatter quelled down. It

wasn't that they were drawing back. It was ridicule.

"Yesterday." "Creepy" "Cosplay" "Too creepy" "Satou in arms"

"Secret creep" "Weirded out" "One of those creepers" the numerous short snippets I had picked up. While a majority of the bombardment came from the main legion, I would have appreciated it if that Ooshima Yumina girl learned to talk a little quieter, or at least stopped repeating the same word over and over.

Feeling like I was crossing a river of needles, I took my seat.

Confirming Satou Ryouko's vacant station, I was hit by a pang of relief. Operating with her usually came with heavy stress. I had no complaints if she opted not to come at all.

Still, I was astonished to see the girl to my right, Ozaki-san's desk had been pushed around ten centimeters away from where it had been the day before. Once they get adverse, girls sure are blatant about it.

When it wasn't like everyone was slamming me, it felt like I had made an enemy of the entire class.

Suffocating. Embarrassing. Pathetic.

At a time like this, I felt like clenching the back of my right hand. I frantically held it in. I'd already promised myself, I wasn't going to contain my hand again. There were five minutes to homeroom. Get on with it already, Dorisen.

A shadow stood before me.

It was a shocker, to be honest. Did Takahashi or Ooshima or Yamamoto or Saitou come to deliver the death penalty so soon?

"Satou-kuuun."

"K-Kobato-san!"

For real? I almost groaned. For her, the existence embodying world peace, to have come to deliver my requiem. If in her usual smile, she told me, "Satou-kun, wouldn't you be better off dead~?" I knew my heart technician would go, "Sorry boss, this is where I say goodbye. 'Cya." and run off.

Aah, her small lips opened with the premonition of catastrophe.

"Good morning, you're a little late today," her bouncing intonation. Oh?

“Y-yeah. Right.”

“I’m sorry about yesterday. We waited around five minutes after homeroom ended, but you didn’t come back so we left ahead.”

“Y-yeah. Right.”

“We should get together some other time.”

“Y-yeah. Right.”

Mass producing copied and pasted lines, I was properly moved. Kobato-san existed outside the ring of malice. She didn’t touch up on Ryouko, and she didn’t seem to despise me. She was a woman of character. To think her virtue would be so high, she could be put to work in national defense. The country will have to start paying her a full yearly salary.

That does it. I’m building a Kobato shrine in my heart. I shall search for my salvation in religion.

“... Muh.”

My eyes met with Ooshima Yumina. A disgusted face. She must not have liked the fact that Kobato-san could calmly talk with someone like me. I remembered well. A few days ago, when Kobato-san asked her how to do makeup, “That sorta thing doesn’t suit you, Kobato,” she ignored her at lightning speed. Ooshima Yumina feared the notion of Kobato-san raising her appeal. Queen bee she may be, but she sure was a petty one. Unfortunately, Kobato-san had already reached her maximum sweetness in her base form. Suck on that.

As my body swelled up with her healing power, another shadow came to stand beside me. A boy.

“I’ve finally found you.” He said in a feigned solemn voice.

“Hewley.”

I ended up twitching in surprise. At the point I timidly turned my head up to look, there he stood.

Seat number thirteen. A short, stout boy with a sports cut. As I recall, his name was Suzuki Osamu.

“... Do you need something?”

“You don’t remember me, Hewley?”

“Who’s this Hewley?” I didn’t want to get involved, but there was

nothing else to retort at.

“I’m talking about you. Who else do you see?”

“No, my name’s Satou. Don’t you have the wrong guy? I’ve never even talked to you before.”

With a swift attack, I brought the conversation to a close.

“Hmph, you can’t fool me.” Suzuki’s bearing brimming with confidence. A voice that resounded across the classroom, and only in that proclamation did he burst into cringy jargon. “Not the magic of these odd eyes, the ‘Thousand Mile Stare’!”

Odd eye. Heterochromia. Where the left eye and right eye are different colors.

“Dude, your eyes are both brown.”

“Hmph. This is but a temporary vessel. I see why you cannot recognize me.”

“And I never wanted to, now go take your seat. Homeroom’s about to start.”

“A large crisis has befallen the multiverse of Zeusheim! The descent of that accursed malign deity has dispersed we twelve knights across the realms.”

I got goosebumps.

“J-just take a seat... okay?”

“We must search out the lost knights and return to Zeusheim. And we will slay the evil god Ephesosmea.”

My goosebumps were going to sprout feathers at this rate.

“It seems thou hath lost thine memory. Wait right there. I will use mine Psychodive to burrow into thy consciousness to ascertain the cause.”

Did he just refer to me with thy?

Suzuki brandished his hand over my head. Before I even had the time to swipe it away, his body lurched back as if he’d been struck. What a speedy development.

“Gwoooh! What a strong magic barrier! For my Psychodive to be reflected!”

I detested the word ‘Creepy,’ a term used to tread over human life.

“Suzuki, you’re kinda acting creepy.” But when I actually tried using

it, it carried quite a reassuring toxicity to it. It had my vote.

“Hmph. It looks like you have been placed under a curse. This is going to be a long battle. But do not forget in your heart, thou art a proud dark holy swordsman, a Zwei Bander!”

“Let alone forget, I never even asked!”

“Cease and desist, Suzuki Osamu!”

The intruding third party wore the only white uniform in class.

“You’re Kinoshita of the white cloth!” Instead of backing off, Suzuki bit right on.

“Do you understand why we wear this white uniform, Satou... nay, Hewley!”

“It’s Satou!”

Going off my inductive reasoning grounded in experience, any high school student who refers to themselves with the royal we is bad news.

“Fwahahah! If you want to know so badly, I’ll tell you.”

Seriously, wait.

“This white cloth is the proof of a sage who carries great wisdom. All I can tell you is that it is deeply tied to the World Congress, the higher ranking organization unifying each nation’s shadow government (Umbra Imperium).”

“What, so you’re the rumored...!” Suzuki purposefully cried out.

“Our conscious domain, the Akasha Fragment details bits and pieces of everything in history from past to present. Indeed, I, Kinoshita, am the man who will someday rule over the world, fwahahahah!”

His laugh kinda sounded like he was properly enunciating every syllable of “Fwahaha”. Just try and imagine the creepiness and cringe delivered to me.

“Muh! Akasha Fragments, I’ve heard of them before! They say it contains bits and pieces of all history past to present!”

“You just freaking repeated his explanation!”

When it seemed to be a conversation, no side was actually interacting. This was the fearsome egotistical clash of two cold fronts.

“Hewley, this Kinoshita will have to borrow your power someday.”

“Halt, sage. That man is a direct knight of Zeusheim (The Heavenly Palace). He has no time to be bothered with earthly affairs. Indeed, there is not a moment to lose!”

“Why did you even come to school then? Isn’t your room enough for your life?”

“Hold it right there, the both of you.”

I almost raised a scream. While things were growing complicated, the third one came.

“... Andou Tatsuoka. This discussion has no place for a bystander. Stand back.” Suzuki swept his arm in an overblown gesture. Cold. Bleak.

“Pfft, bystander, you say? What nonsense! Can you say that after you’ve looked at this!?”

Andou Tatsuoka’s buttons snapped off as he ripped open his jacket. Burst buttons might sound cool on paper, but looking at it up close, I was dumbfounded by how pathetic it was. So anyway, what Andou went as far as to put on a production to emphasize was the Tokusatsu Hero-esque short sleeve shirt he had on underneath it. My vision went dark.

You too, eh. You too. You have the same aura.

“Andou Tatsuoka is no more than a temporary form to blend in with the world,” he hoisted one arm in a brisk motion. A wristwatch that looked seven times cheaper than a G Shock peeked out from his sleeve.

“My true identity is... oh my! I almost went and outed myself. We can’t be having that!”

“Yeah, yeah, so you’re deluded to think you’re one of those metal heroes or something, right? You wear glimmering armor and fight monsters. That toy watch of yours is merch from some tokusatsu show, with the target age somewhere from three to five. Do your powers come from being a modified human? A space detective? Are you a transforming rider?”

“W-what are you talking about Satou! By no means am I anything of the sort! I merely had to attest I am no bystander! And this Blaze

Core is but an ordinary watch.”

With Andou’s deliberate-looking fluster, I used up 500mp to shower him with a gaze colder than any blizzard, but it was as if it did no damage. I had completely forgotten the blizzard eye only worked on bystanders who were in on the gag.

“I am here to teach justice to the people. If a reluctant Satou is to be forcefully dragged into the conspiracy, I shall not stand for it!”

“I appreciate your concern, but you should start picking up those buttons.”

“Andou Tatsuo. Not a soul may escape from our premonitions.

Akasha Fragments, give me a vision! Access!”

“You’re too loud. Can you talk without exclamation points!?”

My good neighbor Ozaki-san was even covering her ears from all the cringe.

“Mrrgh... guh... t-this is!”

Kinoshita ruffled his hair into a mess as he writhed. His exclamation blew a cold wind down my spine.

“Andou... Tatsuo... it was faint, but I saw it... you... you’re...!”

“Fufu, if that cat’s out, then so be it. I’ll let you in on the secret. I am not of this overworld. I came from ‘Underquake’ the country at the depths of the earth... For I am the Armored Quake Soldier Igknight!”

He firmly gripped his fist in front of his chest as if to show off his watch. As firm and practiced as a stock pose.

“The underground huh... no wonder... fufufu.”

I was at the end of my patience.

“Stop it!” When I put anger into my voice, the skit of the three came to a sudden, complete halt. “Why do you have to let your delusions explode right next to me today of all days? It’s right time I snapped.”

“Why, you ask? That goes without saying.”

“You are a rare existence who holds a point of contact with that blue witch.”

“Indeed. My Blaze core also detected the high magical energy that girl possesses.”

Suzuki, Kinoshita, Andou, they each picked up after one another.

“Witch... you mean Satou Ryouko.”

The collapse of one’s life is always brought forth by the smallest of things. In my case, perhaps it was my meeting with Ryouko. Thanks to her coming to school in (especially well-made) cosplay, there was no doubt these folks who possessed the same sort of aura received a call to arms.

“Mn, that means...”

In horror, I glanced around the room.

I never did explain how many ‘folks’ of sturdy delusion existed in our class, did I. Now listen and be amazed. Roughly half of them. The fact was that around half of thirty-five students were lacking in sanity.

Why were so many of the same sort collected into the small world of class 1-A? I couldn’t tell you. All I could say for certain was that the general fabric of human relations at any other school was reduced to half the scale in our class.

And what would you call these people who went on about Dark Holy Swordsmen Zwei Bander and World Chairmen and Armored Quake Soldier Igknight? There are various theories, but I referred to them as such.

These men and women were—dream soldiers.

A general term to denote anyone who had submerged themselves too far into the worlds of anime, games and novels, and ended up creating some cool background setting for themselves.

In olden days, it was called Soldier Syndrome. Their activities were centered on the reader’s column of the Twilight Zone and Mu (Both of them Occult Magazines). In modern days, the internet was the perfect exchange board for them, but back then many of them posted to recruit pen friends and spread the disease. A quick search might come up with something like this.

The waves of darkness are upon us. Warriors of light, please lend me your strength. 14(Girl)

Searching for comrades from my past life. Anyone who recalls the names Alisveil, Riphiter, Nastasha, please contact me. The enemy is near. I appreciate your correspondence. 21(Girl)

Sakuya, where are you? I was Arata in my past life. I'll be waiting by the sacred tree on the river banks. 17(Boy)

The Spirit King is waking from his slumber. To any angels of atonement who feel an affinity to the word prana, now is the time to awaken! Please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the address below! 15(Boy)

Anyone who holds the divine dragon's seven-star crest from their past life, please contact me. 12(Girl)

Anyone here born in the third solar system? Anyone who remembers the great lunar war, I await your reply! 17(Boy)

The key words are 'past life', 'reincarnation' and 'warrior'. They convince themselves they're some sort of chosen warrior and search out comrades. Their current life is a lie, it's their past life that truly mattered, they believed without doubt. This wasn't a matter of having too-strong dreaming tendencies.

As evidence, around the time of the past life boom, there was an incident where female middle school students attempted a mass suicide. Something about how that would return them to their past lives. The most fearsome part of all was how they testified it was to meet the souls of their comrades.

That one happened around 1990. While the circumstances had changed somewhat from back then, the dream soldiers still existed in the modern age.

Why am I so knowledgeable? As smart as you are, haven't you worked it out by now? Well, even if you've noticed, please just don't touch that one. I'd rather not rehear the past.

Anyways, about the people in our class. As expected, or rather, it seems around half of the students had their eyes captured by my conduct. I recalled Shimizu's advice.

"Your only real option is to make an ally of the dream soldiers" is

what he told me. Don't screw with me. First and foremost, carrying a conversation with them was impossible.

"Suzuki, Kinoshita, Andou. Disperse. It's time for homeroom. Take your seats."

"That won't do. I have no time!"

"The world's choice is near. But if you join hands with us, it will be possible to stand against it."

"I only want to protect the peace of the people!"

"Disperse, I say."

If Ryouko had been there, it would have become something crazy.

"Ichirou."

Ryouko muttered from thirty centimeters behind me.

"Waaah!" I cried out like a little girl. "W-when did you get here!?"

"Seven forty-two a.m. before any students arrived."

"Don't lie to me..."

Ryouko alone was someone the rest of the class couldn't ignore.

There were already whispers. With all eyes gathered on her being, Ryouko's even still composed form was like that of a saint.

"... Why did you come here?"

"That statement is contradictory. The Researcher and Ichirou have both been charged with a mission of searching for the Dragon Terminal. Time is to be used most effectively and efficiently. To begin with, the person who demanded that The Researcher attend class yesterday was Ichirou."

"Do you plan to attend class dressed like that?"

"Protocol prevents The Researcher from removing her official equipment when on the job."

"That's going to be a problem!"

"Fret not," Ryouko said before carrying on with something impossible. "The Researcher is concealed with optic camouflage and no ordinary student is able to perceive her."

"No, they're totally looking at you. They're staring daggers into you. Isn't your setting a bit too out there?"

"Before any specimen who does not boast Ichirou's special decree of perception, The Researcher is invisible."

“Is that why you can calmly appear like that before people?”

Just how much was she pushing it with that setting?

“Wear your uniform! You can go home and get it, I’ll cover for you!”

“The Researcher rejects Ichirou’s proposal.”

“I’m telling you to read the atmosphere!”

“The act of reading the atmosphere does not compute. In their daily lives, is it essential that residents of the phenomenal realm carry with them precise sensory means to analyze the components in the air surrounding them?”

“Aaah, god!”

Ryouko was serious to no end.

The way I see it, dream soldiers can be placed into two categories: serious and for show. The former are those that truly believe they come from another world. Those reincarnation warriors from before are the tip of the iceberg for that one. The later, take for instance Suzuki, Kinoshita and Andou, are probably well aware that they’re just high school students. Their shared theatrics likely come from their desire to be the center of attention.

Ryouko reeked of the former. They were the most trouble.

“Good morning, everyone.”

Dorisen came at the worst possible time. The other dream soldiers returned to their seats. At a time like this, they would obediently turn into inconspicuous presences. Their trances were only temporary. When it came to Kinoshita of the white cloth, during class he would change into a normal uniform, so he really wanted the best of both worlds.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Satou-san. I see you finally came to school.”

“.....”

“Satou-san?”

“Ichirou, an adult male is calling your name.”

“He’s talking to you!”

“The Researcher does not have a name like Satou.”

My salvation-seeking eyes turned to Dorisen.

“Alright, well let’s just count our blessings that you at least came today. Luckily, I’m in charge of the first class after homeroom so we

can totally make this work.”

“Eh? You’re going to let her take classes in cosplay?”

“It’s perfectly alright!” his face brimming with confidence. “It is the desire to learn that makes the student!”

As expected, an appeal to emotions.

“Well, as long as you’re fine with that...”

But would the others accept it?

“Ichirou, we must go search. There is no time for primitive education.”

“I refuse. I’m not moving a single step until class is over.”

“Mm...” Ryouko faltered for the first time.

“Satou-san, then won’t you take your seat? You don’t have a textbook, do you? Then let’s see... Sawara-san, can you trade desks with her just for today?”

The skinny girl who sat to my left, Sawara silently stood and got her belongings together.

As Sawara’s seat—next to mine—was opened up, Ryouko obediently lowered herself into it.

“Then Satou, please let Satou-san look at your textbook. From one Satou to another, you should look after one another.”

... I’m glad I was in the back row. If I had anyone staring at me from behind, I would have felt pathetic.

“Desk,” reluctantly, a voice called over. “A form of furniture possessed by residents of the phenomenal realm Used for various tasks, their sizes are also varied. The material ranges from wood to metal, a property determined by its use. A portion of them may be treated as a symbol of wealth.”

“Who asked you to define it? Just push your desk over so you can sit next to me. I’ll let you look at my book.”

Ryouko silently pushed her desk over.

“Take off your hood in class.”

“Lowering defense is inadvisable.”

On the contrary she pulled it down lower, so I forcefully pulled it off.

Her black hair that glistened as if it was damp came out. The

bottled up scent of a young girl scattered, taking me by shock. I recalled what had happened in the classroom yesterday. It was that smell. While I felt the sort of awkwardness as if I had burst a bottle of perfume in a train, it didn't seem anyone else paid it any attention.

"... Now stay like that for the rest of class."

"It is unavoidable. Ichirou's request is accepted."

She actually listened from time to time. I couldn't comprehend her standard.

I opened the textbook on my desk. She closed her face in to about five centimeters above it. Was she nearsighted or something?

"What are you doing?"

"... Reading."

"I can't see. Read it from a bit of a distance. You're creeping me out."

Ryouko nodded

"... Distance is important in battle," God is she irritating.

"Then since you're here, Satou-san, could you read from the textbook?"

Dorisen's faint hopes were crushed.

"....." As expected, Ryouko continued to ignore him.

"Satou-san, if you will."

"....."

"Yeah, then could you try asking, Mens' Satou? Also tell her the page number."

Each situation I was placed in stabbed in more painfully than the last. Could it be the world was crafted solely to bully me? I knew the world was unfair, but this is terrible.

"... Ryouko."

"Do you require something?"

"Read the textbook. From here."

Ryouko picked up her mechanical staff.

"With the support functions of the multipurpose device Ferula, reading compr—"

I snatched multipurpose device Ferula and gently placed it on the

ground.

“Please return, Please return, Please return.”

“Oh shut it. You can have it back after class is over. Additionally, after you read that. Make sure you stand up while you read.”

“Ichirou’s demands are unreasonable and irrational, but abiding by them is the only option.”

My hostage was effective, Ryouko picked up the textbook and stood. Perpendicular to her desk’s facing direction... meaning she turned to me and began reading.

“... Are you reading to me? Face the front.”

She was like that with everything. I ended up taking class feeling like my stomach was twisting in knots.

Ozaki-san to my right had her ears shut the whole time. Isn’t that a bit terrible? But I could read her feelings like the palm of my hand. I was the one who wanted to shut my eyes.

When first period was over, Dorisen immediately summoned me to the hall. It was a hall meeting on what to do with Ryouko second period and beyond

“I’ll put in a word to the other teachers.”

“... So you’re not punishing her for refusing to wear a uniform?”

“I get what you’re trying to say. But while I’m young and it’s only been two years since I was put in charge of a class, for some reason I’ve got some authority in the staff room. Even the principal won’t go against me so easily.”

Just what was this man saying?

“So peace out,” he said with a peace sign.

“Please order her as a teacher to wear a uniform.”

If I was going to be forced to accompany her, that was where I had to start.

“She’s been like that for a while now; she won’t answer to anything I tell her. It’s like she’s treating me like I’m not there.”

“Her setting goes that she has optic camouflage concealing her from her surroundings or something.”

"Oh, I see, so that's how it is. No wonder she ignores me even if I talk to her."

"I'm not sure that's something you should be accepting like that."

"But she listens to you if no one else."

I was at a loss for words.

"... It just worked out like that."

"She seems quite attached to you, that girl."

"Say what you will, but that doesn't make me happy or anything."

"And why's that, Satou? You don't want to be like me with a drop-dead gorgeous wife to flirt with?"

"I want to think about that after I've finished a safe, peaceful school life."

"Hmm," Dorisen let his glasses cloud over.

"Also Sensei,"

"Mn?"

"... It's never good to give someone special treatment. Nothing good ever comes of it."

"I told you, you can peace out about the teachers, Satou."

"You're wrong," for a homeroom teacher, he had quite a vital screw loose. "I'm talking about the students."

"Yeah?"

He didn't seem convinced. Just I was about to add onto that, "Ichirou," a call came my way. At the classroom's back door, clad in a somehow scornful aura, Ryouko was peeking out around half of her face.

"... Have you forgotten your agreement to help with the search? This is a breach of contract."

"Next time, please make it next break. Also, don't come into the hallway dressed like that."

I waved my hand at her as if driving off a cat.

"Oh, she actually went back. She really does listen to you."

"Guh..." crap.

"I didn't make any mistake in my personnel selection. Satou, at least just for today, she's in your hands."

With a soft poke of two fingers into my temple, Dorisen was off.

Right after, the bell for second period rung loud and clear.
Huh? Did he even have any time to talk to the next teacher?

My prediction hit the mark and it was a huge ruckus.

The second period was run by a math teacher who carried the thought process of, “Before being a single human being, a student is but a single minor to be corralled”. Naturally, he wouldn’t permit a student’s cosplay.

“What’s with that appearance!? Satou, oy, Satou!”

“Y-yes sir!”

“Not you, the girl one!”

“.....”

“Don’t ignore me! What’s with that attitude! Are you looking down on me or the field of mathematics!?”

“S-sensei, there’s a deep reason to this!”

“Satou, you shut up! Your teacher’s talking to Satou!”

“Umm, this was our homeroom teacher’s idea and...!”

“R-really? Dorisen-kun’s?”

Even his fellow teachers call him that?

“... I see... then let’s continue the lesson. Umm, how far did we get yesterday?”

What amazing authority! Just who was Dorisen supposed to be?

While the reason was anyone’s best guess, I managed to safely clear the class.

Ryouko was stooped over to an unnatural extent, gazing at the textbook as if chowing down on it (thanks to that, I wasn’t able to read it). Why was it that every little thing she attempted came off as downright suspicious behavior? It wasn’t only once or twice that I felt compelled to slam her face into the book with all my might. She should be thanking my generosity.

While I wouldn’t call it compensation for my endurance, I got to speak my mind to the girl.

During break time, before the students from the other classes had come out, I pulled Ryouko into the hallway first thing. The stairs

leading from the third floor to the roof, people rarely ever ventured to its landing. I had her apprehended.

“Stop acting like no one else can see you.”

“There is no acting, only fact.”

“Fine, you can be like that with our classmates. I doubt they’ll give you the time of day either. But at least interact with the teachers. I’m begging you.”

“If the concealment barrier is dispelled, the informational body lingering in the school currently in day-sleep may experience an unwanted awakening. An informational body is highly susceptible to a Researcher who boasts the same magical wavelength—”

“Okay, cheers to a splendid setting! Now won’t you bend the rules a bit and talk to just the teachers? Please?”

“The Researcher is unable to take any action that will harm the search for the Dragon Terminal.”

“Do you not have the functionality to remove a specified target from the scope of your spellcraft?”

“That is possible.”

“Then if you don’t do that, I’m not helping out with your search. Will that be enough for my side of the negotiations?”

“... Understood. The teachers will be removed from the targets of the ritual.”

“Listen close, keep your interactions set to soft. If anyone starts nagging you on your uniform, just say I’m sorry, my mistake. I’ll handle it after that. Also, let’s see, next is...”

Ryouko was beginning to fidget.

“What’s wrong?”

“.....”

“... You’re a strange girl, you know that? Hey, so about when we go outside, I’d like to avoid places where that appearance will draw attention. I understand that invisible setting of yours, but how about a disguise or something? You can put a little more thought into it. I’ve been thinking, but if we’re searching, isn’t it better if we split up to search...?”

Looking left and right, rubbing the top of her foot against her calf,

as if she couldn't settle down.

"... That's about it for now. It's about time we returned to the classroom."

There was around a minute of break left. The hints of idle chatter in the halls fading out, we could likely get back to class without any strange looks.

As I climbed down the stairs, Ryouko made off in a different direction (The hall of classrooms was stuck onto a shorter hallway with club rooms and such, making the entire building into an L shape).

"Hey now, where are you going?"

I grabbed her wrist to stop her.

"... To search."

"Not on my watch. Class isn't over yet."

I pulled her towards the classroom, but for some reason the resistance was harsher this time.

"Don't struggle!"

"U-uurgh... nguh, gah."

The usual mechanical character Ryouko was becoming like a wild animal.

"What's with you, adding something new to your story? Tacking stuff on after the fact is the most embarrassing thing you can do."

"Nom."

She bit my finger.

"Ouch!"

Now free, Ryouko briskly bounded into the women's' restroom.

... Oh, I see.

A while after the bell had rung. Ryouko exited the bathroom with an air of composure.

"Investigation Result: The Dragon Terminal is not in the Girls' Restroom."

"I won't say anything about it. 'n wait, if you need to go, just tell me."

"The Researcher is always demanding for Ichirou to participate in the investigation. A reaction beyond your means was directed this

time, so as an exceptional measure, The Researcher looked into it on her own.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, so go wash your hands.”

I pushed her back into the bathroom. She later came out wiping her hands on her robe. Did she have no love for her cosplay?

“You should at least equip a handkerchief in that multipurpose something of yours.”

“Memory indicates we were to return to the classroom. Has the mission been canceled?”

“... No, we’re returning.”

Ryouko held out her hand.

“You want me to lead you by the hand? As long as you don’t run away, I don’t particularly see any need...”

A cold, wet hand— its delicate make stole my eyes. A feebleness I could even call abnormal. While it shouldn’t have been strange for me to retort, “Who wants to hold your hand?” I didn’t want to select an adverse response.

“... You’ve got small hands... they must have gotten the scale wrong.”

She was short and her face was small. She was small-built all around.

“It’s kinda like in a 1:100 scale model, you were the only part cast in 1:144. Are you feeling alright? Eating properly?”

“A small build is advantageous to investigative work.”

And yet her eyes alone were normal size, making it so her facial features overly emphasized her pupils. The conditions for a beauty that draws looks might be surprisingly unbalanced.

“Make a fake smile, and you’d stand out even without the cosplay, you know?”

“Apology. The Researcher was unable to pick up that last remark.”

“... Nah. Nothing. We’re late, but let’s get back to the classroom.”

Her reason wasn’t that she wanted to stand out. She was different from the folks in class.

For that alone, well, I wouldn’t mind giving her credit.

“I’ll be taking that credit back.”

“Ichirou’s thought process is incomprehensible. It must be interpreted as a resident of the phenomenal realm’s characteristic to jump to conclusions.”

“You’re the one jumping around, smashing down my hopes just after I decided to give you a chance.”

Ryouko and I stood in an empty hallway. After school? I wish. Classes were going on. The other students were all studying. Only Ryouko and I stood in the hall with no objective.

“Why did it come to this?”

While I struggled to accept my circumstance, she calmly dealt the finishing blow.

“It is evident. The Researcher caused a dispute with the teacher in charge of fourth period.”

“That’s right. If you’re not serious about this, then get out, he said.”

While Dorisen’s authority got us across third period, it didn’t work on the fourth teacher. “I can’t make an exception for Dorisen-kun’s class alone!” the educator put his displeasure on show, taking an obstinate stand against teaching anyone in that getup. Well, that was the natural reaction.

“As the Researcher has no emotion corresponding with the term ‘serious’, she followed his advice and left the classroom,” Ryouko’s voice carried not the slightest hint of guilt. “No problems to report.”

“Huge problems, dear Ryouko.” I informed her with a thug face brimming with hostility. “When you’re the one who was kicked out, why do I have to go with you?”

She looked at me dubiously.

“If The Researcher and Ichirou are to search for the Dragon Terminal, is this not the appropriate situation? If the students must stay in the classrooms, we have secured a far greater degree of freedom.”

“I just want to attend class.”

“But the one who petitioned to exclude teachers from concealment protocol was Ichirou. This event came forth as a direct result, so it should have been foreseeable to you.”

“Now wait right there. He didn’t tell me to leave. I’m here because you dragged me along on the way out.”

“.....?”

She tilted her head as if, to the depths of her heart, she truly didn’t understand.

“... Whatever. I was an idiot to expect anything. I’ll join your search for now.”

I couldn’t shake off the feeling I was getting in with the wrong crowd.

“Oh, is this the place?”

Ryouko had led me to a location half a stairway up from the third-floor landing. The stairwell that led to the roof. One might call it a penthouse. That would technically make it the fourth floor, but if you didn’t actually walk out to the roof, it was little more than a small shed where dust-covered colored traffic cones were stacked on top of one another.

As it was for many schools, our roof barred unsupervised entry, so people rarely ventured there. From what I’d heard, over the course of the school’s history, the garbage that cost a pretty penny to get rid of was usually just left hanging on the roof. Desks, chairs, and the like, there were a few hundred of them altogether.

“The door is locked. It won’t open.”

“The place is off limits. For suicide prevention.”

“Negative, there is a mistake in that information.”

“Is something there?”

“Beyond this door, exceedingly high-level Genius Loci have been detected. That indicates this is a place suited for the construction of a temple.”

“Again with the incomprehensible babble... a temple? You want to pray to some god?”

“The Central Assembly holds no concept of religion. For a matter of convenience, a temple is deemed necessary as a location to borrow the power of specific high-order intelligences to exercise them in spellcraft.”

What a needlessly detailed setting. If you put in too much, it’ll be a

real pain cleaning up inconsistencies.

“So you’re saying the roof’s one of them?”

With a terribly serious face (though that was the only expression she ever made), she nodded.

“But if it’s off limits, there’s nothing you can do about it. Either put up with it or think up some other setting.”

“As this space is unnecessary for regular duties, it will bring no hindrance to the mission. However, once the mission is over, it may prove necessary to return to the other world.”

So it was a place she definitely wanted to check up on sometime later.

“... But if you go out without permission, the teachers will be angry. We don’t have the key regardless.”

“No problem.”

After she operated her staff, the twang of a released spring preceded a metal ear cleaner-looking item shooting out of the tip.

“What’s that?”

“Magical Lockpick.”

“Hey!”

I caught the scent of crime. No, that’s all I could smell.

“By using this pick to apply tension on the inner cylinder and pouring in magic, it is possible to bypass this lock.”

“Where’s the magic!? That’s a criminal technique! Nope, no way, confiscated!”

I collected the evidence.

“It is an essential piece of equipment, especially in residential districts...”

“Wah, if you start picking there, it won’t end with a laugh! Do you really not get it? Even if you’re playing around, if someone catches you, you’re ruined. We live under the fear of the media, you hear!”

“Bystanders are unable to perceive the researcher, so that premise is meaningless. Requesting return.”

“I’ll be keeping this for now.”

“.....”

Despite her poker face, she exuded quite a displeased aura.

“I’ll be the one troubled if you get taken in... try to understand.”
I’ll admit, as a kid, I always wanted to equip my bike and such with all sorts of cool gadgets. But this girl had crossed the line.
Once again, I was left thinking. There’s something wrong with Satou Ryouko.

When lunch was near, even a witch succumbed to hunger. Her stomach was rumbling something awful, but her face was unchanging. “Magic will be converted into energy, so it poses no problem,” she said, bringing me serious concern.

The main challenge was not being seen.

No matter what she did, Ryouko’s outfit stood out in school. With that being the case, if I was with her, I’d be caught in the crossfire and struck by shame. I only accompanied her because there were few people around, and lunch was the time frame where students were most free to strut around campus. Personally speaking, I wanted to remain in the classroom as much as possible.

The cafeteria was naturally a danger zone.

However, a look at my watch told me there were ten minutes to lunch, so I chose to quickly eat and get back.

There wasn’t yet a single student in the vast cafeteria. This was our chance.

“Two tanuki soba.”

Ignoring the lunch lady’s suspicious look, I brought a plastic bowl of noodles over to Ryouko.

“Hurry and eat. We’ll get cold looks when the other students get here.”

“Energy replenishment.”

Muttering something incomprehensible, she sipped at the soba.

“Hey, the way you hold chopsticks is all over the place.”

She had both stick strangled in a firm underhand grip, like how a toddler holds a fork.

“... Some practice is required to utilize this cylindrical implement. The Researcher’s days in the Phenomenal Realm are too scarce.”

“Hah? Why implement?”

“To consume is akin to replenishing energy, a necessary process in the maintenance of a carbon-based activity body.”

“Otherworld or not, you eat to live. Don’t you think that setting’s too forceful? I’d even call it bizarre.”

“.....”

I was ignored. It seemed she found retorts at her setting to be particularly irritating, and even I was ignored for those.

“Hey, you seriously can’t use chopsticks? You’re not acting?”

“In most cases, energy replenishment in our world is carried out with magic paste and...”

“Got it, got it. Watch me, you hold it like this.”

“... Unnecessary. This method accomplishes the task at hand.”

“If you keep saying that, you’ll never be able to use them. If your investigation drags on, you’ll have more opportunities to use them, so you’re better off mastering the skill.”

Why did I have to interact with my classmate as if I was her mother?

“Like this?”

“Your fingers are wrong. Here, and here... good, you’ve got it. Now you put things between them and pinch.”

Ryouko’s chopsticks failed to grasp a noodle. It fell through en route to her mouth. On her fifth attempt, “Ggnnn” she finally groaned out. It was one of those human emotions she displayed from time to time. Those terribly infantile ones.

“The length of this cylindrical implement is not rational. To adequately transmit the strength of the fingers, a far shorter version would be better for the task. This product is defective.”

“But then your hands would get dirty.”

“Without the cultural idiosyncrasy to avoid any foreign substance on the hands in any task, that explanation would lack any force of persuasion. If the need arises, a resident of the phenomenal realm may take the initiative and dirty their hands. There is no consistency in this sense of values.”

“Food can be hot. Who wants to get burned with short chopsticks?”

“Danger prevention... then the form of this implement is acceptable.”

She really was incessant.

“Aaah, no, don’t bend over it, don’t slurp like a dog. Uwah, you’re getting soup everywhere. Hey, don’t use your hands.”

It really was like I was looking after a child’s meal. When soba was supposed to be a meal one could finish in five minutes, she had taken fifteen, and still had a long way to go.

Eventually, the starving students raised a subterranean tremor advancing upon us in large numbers, but we were unable to move from the edge of the table.

Were we frowned upon? Hah, of course. What’s more, it was by all years this time.

While, “Oh, who’s that~!” “How cute~!” a portion of the older girls received a favorable opinion, as expected, “Creepy”s and “Whoah”s and “Do you know them?”s made up the majority of the whole. A single, “The boy’s cute” comment in a deep throaty voice sent a chill down my spine.

My cold sweat wouldn’t stop under the unbearable air. I opted to cast my special plan to mitigate Ryouko’s idiosyncrasies to the absolute minimum (and fast).

“Hey, seriously! We’re going to be using that in the next play, so be careful not to dirty that costume! This is a matter tied to our drama club’s good name! Lunch is valuable practice time, chop chop!”

I felt a psychological aversion to getting too much into that role, so I couldn’t help but be monotonous, or rather give a dull and intentional-sounding reading.

But how about that? Was that acting too much? I tried observing the surrounding reactions.

“So they’re drama club.” “They must’ve put a lot into that costume.”

“Looks like the drama club’s got one up on us for the culture festival.” “There’s still half a year to October, the girl’s got guts.”

“Our first years are going to get an earful of this.” “He’s got a nice rump.”

What a nice, broadminded school we have!

... Though a single throaty comment did bother me.

Whatever the case, I managed to overcome. In the corner of the cafeteria, only the three crows, Kawai, Kobayashi and Nakamura looked at us and grinned.

“Ah...”

With a grasp on the situation, their stance was derisive, and while I detested the fact our class had already been divided into the highs and the lows, I realized that the highs were aware of their standing as well.

Even the closest of friends will stop getting involved with you the moment you're a target of bullying; it's a common occurrence. I'd experienced it before, so I knew the feeling well. A noble is unable to interact with a commoner on equal terms. Love is just as impossible.

“... Nothing I can do about it.”

I had no friends, and I was looking after some weirdo. My human relations bargaining was coming undone. What was supposed to be a carefree position was terribly heavy on my heart.

I had to attend afternoon classes. That was my final fortress as a student.

The incident happened as I was struggling to persuade Ryouko on the way back to the classroom. It was set to happen sometime.

“Hey you! What do you think you're doing, dressed like that!?”

The towering male student counselor approached as if to show off his barrel of a body. While on first glance, he looked fat, it was in actuality an armor of pure muscle.

He was like a military commander who had transcended human knowledge straight out of a Three Kingdoms-based action game.

“G-general! I mean sensei! There's a reason to all this!”

“You stay out of this! You, whippersnapper, state your class and your name!”

“.....”

The all-too-familiar ignoring. While her invisible setting now

excluded teachers, she must really dislike his type.

“Gnn! You’re going to ignore me, Inomata, your guidance counselor!? No matter what strange things you wear, you’re still a student of this school, aren’t you!?”

Inomata-sensei yelled with such force I could picture him spinning an iron hammer or spear overhead. If we were in the Showa area, he would definitely be carrying around some super heavy armament to scold his students.

“Please wait, sensei! There’s a deep reason to all this, and it has to do with Dorisen!”

“... Dorisen, you say?” his attitude blatantly changed. “That whelp... he’s letting it get to his head. But even if she is Dorisen’s protégé, failure to wear a uniform goes against regulation! I can’t overlook it!”

“I know, right,” I completely agreed with him.

“Off to the counseling room with you! Come on! You’re coming with me! Boy, you get to class!”

“.....”

Ryouko looked at me. I guess the term stink eye was meant for times like this.

“... Don’t look at me. Go with him. I’m sure Dorisen will make some arrangements, so wait for him to bail you out. And while you’re at it, brush up a bit on how the world works.”

“Afternoon search?”

“You should be able to tell that’s impossible. I already treated you to a bowl of soba, just quietly bend to authority for a bit.”

“.....”

“Lassy, hurry up!”

Suddenly hunching over, she followed behind Inomata with bothersome feet. An altogether rebellious attitude.

“.....!”

A few steps in, she turned and sent a dazzling glance signaling out her distress with all her might.

“I told you, you’re on your own.”

Fifth period was peaceful to an intoxicating degree.

I was able to concentrate to my heart's content, and I achieved a splendid understanding. It's not like I liked studying, but in order to maintain my grades with the least possible effort, I wanted to take my classes free of obstacles.

The source of my headaches, Ryouko... didn't come back. She was taken off to the counseling room, and that was the end of it.

I thought she'd finally crumble after about an hour of interrogation and lecture, but even when sixth period came and went, followed by the end-of-the-day homeroom, she didn't return. It was heaven's blessing. My after school was all mine; but in order to do that, I caught Dorisen right after he'd sent us off to confirm it.

"Sensei, Ryouko was taken to the student counseling room. Did you hear?"

"Ooh, Satou, well about that. Inomata-sensei sure made a troublesome catch."

He gave a truly delightful laugh. Was this person alright?

"So what happened?"

"I did pop in to explain the situation. I think she'll be acquitted soon."

"Is that so. But if she doesn't wear her uniform, won't the cycle repeat?"

"Yaaaah, well let's see. She doesn't seem to have any intentions of complying. Why don't you try persuading her?"

"When it comes to her clothes, even my words don't work."

"Yeah, those clothes are a hard one to swallow."

"Isn't that normally enough for a suspension, that one?"

"Do you really think a suspension will accomplish anything with her?"

... Well, he was right.

The punishment was a measure to urge a student to reflect and better themselves. A punishment with no effect was no more than busy work. There was no way such a penalty would cause Ryouko to rethink anything.

"So how about counseling?"

“We tried it once, but... no cigar, hahaha. Counseling, see, it’s powerless if the one subject to it doesn’t intend to speak or listen.” Well at least someone’s having fun.

“Personally speaking, I’ve got my hopes on that penetrating power of yours, Satou.”

“What sort of power am I supposed to have?”

“This is just my intuition, but you have a good vibe around you. A depth a little different from normal, or rather... my teenage sensor’s all rusted up, so I can’t really explain it.”

“... An I’m not seeing it. To summarize, you had your eye on me.”

“As the only person she’ll actively come into contact with, you’re my only hope~.”

Dorisen had authority. He was versatile. But when it came to Ryouko’s type, I got the feeling he wouldn’t be of any direct help. I found myself a bit bewildered by the fact the adults were surprisingly inept.

“For now, how about you go pick up Satou? Could you look after her tomorrow too?”

“I’ll let her look at my textbook... anything more than that is a bit...”

“Hmmm, I think you’ve got a talent for it.”

Don’t joke with me. I never asked for nor wanted some strange talent to look after weirdos. I had a bad premonition. With the curse-like details writhing around my consciousness keeping me ostracized from the class, I would have to discern my means of escape in the ranks of the dream soldiers. This was more than fleeing the capital, my life was in freefall.

Satou Ryouko was, to me, the incarnation of degradation.

Did I really have any obligation to pick up the seeds of my own fall? Of course, I did not.

Once I stuffed my textbook into my bag and turned to leave, a shadow was cast on my route of advance.

“Urrgh,”

The shadow suddenly clasped its throat as it cried out in pain.

Aaaargh, raising a beastlike voice, it fell to its knees and threw its body onto the floor. Regardless of the dirt getting on her uniform, she continued squirming left and right. That wasn't the Usual sort of writhing. Pale legs peeked out from her skirt as she continued with an intensity that would eventually lay bare her undergarments. 'Are you okay!? Pull yourself together! I'll get you to the infirmary right away! There's no way I'll ever abandon one of my precious classmates!'

... Is something I would never say.

If I responded here, I would be falling for the trap.

With the movements of a cockroach using the last of its life after being hit with pesticide, she cried out with kehees and gyaaas. If she shut her mouth and sat still, she might come off as a well-raised young woman, but those eccentricities completely reversed any good impression she might give off.

"... Believer... you continue to burn me still... anti-cross... if only I had..."

Hino over here was the girl Dorisen had carted off to the infirmary not too long ago. Up to now, I'd witness a number of classmates caught up in her stalling tactic. But everyone had opted to ignore it. Strangely, Hino would never do this to other dream soldiers. Her targets were strictly restricted to bystanders.

So the day finally came when I was subject to this shady ritual.

"The relic of the dark saint...!"

I straddled over her to pass. It was the best option.

Next it was Suzuki Osamu who stood before me.

"A message came from Zeusheim. It looks like things have been blown sky high."

I pushed past him.

"Let me through. I'm going home. I've got no friends, so I'm going alone."

"Fuhahahah! Write it as ally, read it as friend. Satou, you are never alone. As two who weep for the world, let us link hands and intervene in the world's decision."

I pushed past Kinoshita.

“I don’t really know about that. Sorry, I’ve got to get going.”

“Satou, there’s something you have to hear. Do you know of the Death Time-Space in the empire of Gaizonic? In that space, the spacers are able to exhibit their powers to their very limit.”

“Home. I’ve got to get home. I’m going home. To that warm lost land of so long ago...”

Feeling like I was in a disaster movie, I pushed past Andou.

I crossed the valley of the weirdos; I returned alive to win first prize at Cannes.

“Oy, stop right there, you impudent wretch.”

It came in a clear, dignified voice. Even I had to stop at that one. I should have ignored it. Insolent wretch wasn’t a term any normal person would use.

“Eh?”

“You, you said your name was Satou.”

“... Who?”

She had her body (intentionally) covered by the curtain. Answering the call, she flamboyantly brushed the cloth aside to reveal her stunning form. What a flashy entrance. If it all happened naturally, it might be somewhat cool, but the fact it was set up made it painful to watch. I’m pretty sure the only people this cringe doesn’t reach would have to be dream soldiers and the elderly.

The female student I’d never spoken to before was named Oda, if I recalled correctly.

Her style could be explained in two compound words.

Eyepatch swordswoman.

She wore a black eyepatch like a pirate. A Japanese katana... was impossible, so she carried around a wooden sword overly prettied up like a gal’s cellular phone. Incomprehensible. She kept her long hair bound at a high point in a ponytail. From time to time, she clad herself in a Nobunaga mantle (or at least that’s what I called it).

Among the female dream soldiers, excluding Ryouko, she ranked in the top three, and I glared at her. Oda returned a harsh look.

“To think you would abandon a suffering maiden. You must be a wretched good for nothing.”

"I'll be right there, home."

I could tell my own voice was growing mechanical.

"You can't see that Hino is seeking help? Is that the attitude a man should take?"

"Then why don't you do something?" Unable to take it, I finally whipped back. Oda furrowed her brow. I must have struck somewhere painful.

"... What's important is that you lack that spirit of a man, of a samurai."

"That sorta thing hasn't existed for a hundred years!"

"It lives on within me." She held up her wooden sword. "And in my Kokarasumaru."

A chipped scream almost spilled out from my throat.

Kokarasumaru? I mean, c'mon.

The wandering vampire setting (presumably) Hino unsteadily stood to her feet to join them.

Suzuki, Kinoshita, Andou, Oda, Hino. I was encircled by the five-star constellation of nightmares.

Dorisen's words flashed across my mind.

"You've got a talent for it," "You have a good vibe around you,"

"He's got a nice rump."

Wait, wait, wait, wait, don't screw with me.

"Is it because I fell out? Because I made a mistake? Is that why?"

"Zeusheim" "Akasha Fragment" "Underquake" "Kokarasumaru"

"Anti-cross"

"Wah" I screamed and ran off. Creepy, creepy, creepy.

I leapt into the hall in a trance, my feet set on a straight course for the front door. The front door was where the blue witch lay in wait.

"Search."

"Eek."

I couldn't run this time. I tripped, fell, and lost my strength.

Fate's little pranks, or rather fate's bullying was in perfect form today.

"The teachers' surveillance is harsh, the conclusion has been reached that searching inside the school will prove difficult."

“Say what? So you finally understand that?”

The thought came with a small hope.

“Therefore, today, we will conduct a search in town.”

An even greater hell came upon me.

Ryouko walked down the congested road in front of the station paying no mind to the laughs or disdain. At this point, the looks and pain were difficult to even describe, and as one accompanying her, I was also subject to ill-natured inquiries.

When Ryouko visited the classroom, I felt like dying.

In the cafeteria today, I felt like dying several times over.

And now, with the stage even larger, the audience had immediately expanded to several hundred fold. The term shame was lacking.

Disgrace wasn't able to express it in its entirety. humiliation, chagrin, remorse, a living disgrace, indignity, torture, contempt; all of them put together, they had come to torment me.

“Somewhere! S-somewhere where no one's looking! A blind alley, a dead end, please!”

“Investigation will begin at the station and department store.”

They were both places with enough passersby to make an industry out of them. I tried angling an ear to the voices of town.

“Pfff, what's that?” “They filmin'?” “Ain't it just cosplay?” “For

real?” “Hey, those two are a riot.” “You young folk these days...

mumble, *mumble*.” “Wow, that's embarrassing!” “Hey, lookie what we 'ave here, 'er's somethin' interestin' 'n fron' a da station.”

“High level otaku right there.” “You think we're on TV?” “Bweh,

gross.” “Are they in high school?” “Someone try talking to them!

Let's go have some fun!”

The harsh voices of society grew near. I wanted to run in a dash.

Ryouko was indifferent whether someone was there or not. Even now, she was casually surveying the area.

All of a sudden, she got on all fours and peered under a car parked at the bend. The passersby looked down at her with shock on their faces.

“Quit it! Stand up!”

So invested in her search, it appeared my voice was a long shot from reaching.

Next, her attention shifted to the street light.

“Don’t tell me,” I pulled at the hem of her robe. “Please stop, anything but that.”

Ryouko began nimbly climbing her way up the street light.

“It’s not there, you won’t find anything up there!”

I was already at my limit so I forcefully dragged her to some unpopulated side street. While a few people passed, it wasn’t as much as the main road.

“Not only does Ichirou have no intent to help with the search, he is actively impeding it.”

“You can’t go out in public looking like that!”

“No one is able to see the Researcher.”

That setting truly was a pain! The public eyes weren’t functional as a tool of persuasion.

“You’ll be in trouble if the police get here. Hey, I won’t tell you to read the mood, but you should at least listen when I’m seriously at my wit’s end. You may find it nosy, but I’m offering you information that will prove exceedingly beneficial for your future.”

I ended up talking like some salesman trying to lead someone into a scam.

Her emotionless eyes wide open like the full moon, she stared at me. Could it be this girl really was a robot human? She had enough intensity to make me reconsider.

“So police are bad.”

“If the police get wind of this,”

There was no doubt I grew louder when I brought up the police.

“Hey, you two, what’s this about the police? Mn, what’s with your getup? Could you show some identification?”

A real police officer peeked in from down the street.

My confusion at the time couldn’t be expressed in words. With my mind in a panic, I lost the aptitude for normal decision making. I have to act, that instant’s impulse alone swirled within me. The

result: I grabbed Ryouko's hand and ran off.

"Ah, hey! Why are you running!?"

Psychologically, once you start running, it's impossible to stop.

That's why, once you're in motion, even if only ruin awaits you, you must keep running on. If I had to bring up any good fortune, we managed to shake off the police officer that time. Turning randomly down several streets, keeping low in shadows, illegally crossing properties in the residential district, by the time I noticed it, we were in a dark alley.

"... My memory along the way... is pretty hazy."

To run so far, to feel so afraid, it was the first in my life for both of them. My feeble heart raised a complaint. "Boss, when'll ya ever learn, we heart folks, we don't get no rest. If you exploit us like that... we might just have ta walk out on ya someday," why don't you just stop right here, right now. Kill me and give me peace.

"Are you okay, Ryouko?"

For a while now, even Ryouko had her hands full catching her breath.

"How about that? If a policeman finds you, that's what happens. Painful, right?"

"... Then what do I do?"

"You wear a uniform!" I emphasized.

"Rejected. Defense will be lowered."

"Defense, you know... and all that sort of stuff, see..."

It seems she had no intent to wear one no matter what.

... Rather than wandering around town, wasn't restricting it to school the easier choice? Being seen by my peers scared me enough to make mincemeat of my heart, but it was better than the police... no, but still... my anguish wouldn't stop.

"Ichirou."

"What?"

"It has become evident that searching the town during day hours is horribly inefficient."

"... That so."

The pain in my head was acting up again.

My phone rang that night.

It was quite rare for my cellular phone to get a call. I was still somewhat perplexed on how to answer it. The number displayed wasn't one that I knew. An unregistered one.

"Hello?"

'It's Dorisen.'

It was Dorisen.

"Why do you know my number?"

I didn't remember giving it to him.

'Yeah, yours truly, Dorisen-sensei used his connections to look into it. It's urgent, after all.'

So even Dorisen sticks another sensei to the end of that. Hmm, I'm learning so much.

"Urgent?"

'The police placed a call to the school. They said Satou and Satou were running around town.'

"The police are amazing!"

In less than the span of the day, they even had me identified.

'You think? Any good boy in blue should be familiar with the local uniforms, and if they managed to narrow down the suspect pool to a first-year male leading around a weirdo, I'm sure they could pin you down quite easily.'

Boy in blue, he says.

"Umm, I haven't committed any crime."

'Ah, yeah, well, you're free to do whatever you want after you graduate, but,' free to do what, exactly? 'there won't be any further measures taken this time, so rest at ease. It's just, I'd like something done about Ladies' Satou operating freely in town.'

Was he implying he wanted me to do something about it? After hanging up, I thought over it carefully. But no matter how I thought, I couldn't find any good ideas. Searching for something that didn't exist is a difficult task indeed. The Dragon Terminal, for instance.

“Satoouuuuuuu!” “Yesssssss...”

“Mensssssssss!” “Yesssssss...”

“You dirty little...!” “I can explain...”

As for what the stream of conversations referred to, that would be the illustration of teachers enraged by Ryouko’s conduct or rather creepduct, as I put my best efforts towards soothing them. By the way, Mens was my nickname. While it was a double plural, I was doing the work of ten people or more, so that wasn’t strange.

Without rest, Ryouko continued coming to school every day.

She disrupted any and all classes she attended. Teachers flew into rage one after the next, until it came to pass that she was disregarded while in class. It did seem that Dorisen and the other teachers had come to the decision.

During break times, she would stick fast to me, even attempting to drag me into town should the opportunity present itself. My experience in town had become a nightmare, become a trauma that remained behind in my heart. The city is hell.

Then did that mean I was fine being openly scorned at school? Well, not in the slightest.

But time is a cruel mistress.

Just by operating as a set with Ryouko for a week, I was stuck with the label of ‘Creepette’s Boyfriend’. While I did think Creepette was the perfect term to describe Ryouko, the problem was the boyfriend portion. I was so unwilling it reached the realm of insulting.

I mean yeah, I wanted a girlfriend. But I didn’t need one enlisted in the dream soldier battalion. I’m not even acting tough. Each time I was force fed a dream soldier’s Avant Garde setting, goosebumps would rise on my arm. You can’t fall in love with someone you have a physiological revulsion towards, can you?

There was one more surprise to take note of.

Ryouko, that girl, she was surprisingly popular with the upperclassmen. Hard to believe, right?

Her favor with the third year girls was especially abnormal, and they would often call out to her, pat her head, touch her costume,

and give her candy. At times like those, her silent, expressionless character wouldn't crumble, and without saying thanks, she acted in a way that shouldn't be endearing in any way shape or form. That was the best part, apparently.

... I don't get it, the world of big sisters.

Considering how girls of her own age found her creepy, it made me wonder where that gap came from. Perhaps rather than age, because she was from a different generation, even if it was painful to look at, they could treat it like someone else's problem.

I was also a side recipient of their favor.

"Mr. Boyfriend, you better look after her." "You can't do pervy stuff with her yet." "In exchange, I'll push my chest against you a bit, how about that." "If anything's bothering you, you can talk to me, okay?" When surrounded and adhered to a flock of large mammaries, my memory grew terribly fragmented. The sheer bliss was blowing time itself away. While I was well aware I was being treated as a pet, as someone treated like a gross insect by all the decent girls from my own class... what do you want from me?

In the complicated and mysterious situation surrounding us, Dorisen was also full of mystery. That authority and manipulation skill was abnormal from a single young teacher.

There were times when I thought he must have some dirt on the other teachers, but there weren't any teachers who seemed to dislike him. He had his fervent supporters. When it came to Ryouko's mental state, his lack of delicacy made him painfully powerless, but he was reliable on other fronts.

The backing of a teacher and the third year girls was quite a blessing to we, the ostracized few. It imparted the courage to come to school every day.

But there also exist allies one wouldn't feel blessed to have.

Numerically speaking, over fifteen of them, without question the largest power within class 1-A. The scary part was that... for them... it wasn't Ryouko—

But me they had taken to.

That day, when I entered the classroom, they immediately closed in. “Oh, Hewley! According to the latest message from Zeusheim, they,”

“... Move, Suzuki Osamu.”

As I pushed him aside and attempted to make for my desk, he formed an astonished face.

“The name is Kira. Suzuki I am not.”

There it is, Kira. The man in question would insist that was the true him (his real name, even).

“Have you forgotten, Hewley!? The Dark Holy Swordmen Zwei Bander that only we of the odd-eye fairy tribe born in the Multiverse of Zeusheim can become. Serving directly under the heavenly palace, only twelve of which can exist in the world, a proud and noble—”

“Shut it, one hundred percent mongoloid.”

Nothing happens if you cut one down, Suzuki was only the beginning. My classmates came up one after another.

“Satou! The time has come to speak of the great secret of the Akasha Fragments!”

“Satou, to think you were a pagan knight... but friend or not, if you are my foe, I, Armored Quake Soldier Igknight will strike you down!”

“Even if you are a practitioner of the Tosotsu Ittou Style, you can’t defeat me, the successor to the Oda Style Demon Lord of the Sixth Heaven’s blade.”

“Satou-kun, it throbs. Not enough blood. Please share your blood with me.”

“Just leave me alone!”

I brushed past the twisted concoctions. The next woman immediately stood before me.

“Kukukuh.”

The basis behind a dream soldier’s delusional explosion lay in entrapment and false invitation. First, you put on a show, and if someone gets wrapped up on it, you fiercely force your original setting down their throat. That’s why ignoring them is highly

effective.

Despite that, it did seem there was one immoral soul who would go as far as to destroy the pattern to speak of their world. Upon being ignored, she changed strategy and swiftly spewed it out.

“Ah, Satou-kun, I’m sorry. I have multiple personality order, I’m sorry. That was personality number one seven two, Cathy, but you’re really better off not getting her angry...”

There’s something wrong.

“Okay, then can you keep her away from me?”

There’s something wrong with each and every student in this class!

“Guh!” Just by passing next to him, a certain boy suppressed one eye in pain.

“What the heck is this, this prana of darkness!? D-don’t tell me...

Satou... he was the prince of darkness!?”

Ignore. Ignore.

“Satou-kun?” a female voice called over.

“You don’t have to worry about our class. I’ll... protect them. Even if it costs me my life...”

“How about you take a seat?”

“Fufufu, Satou, what splendid weather we have today,” Holding a rose in his mouth, a man small but wide called over. “How about some fencing after school? What do you think?”

“I think you should take a page out of the flower’s book, and wither away.”

I ran into a girl. It was Mori, who was renowned for walking around with her eyes closed. She was also a harsh one.

“Ah, I’m sorry... this smell is Satou-kun? I’m sorry, I can’t see, so... but my sense of smell has increased to compensate so I can differentiate who I’m talking to, fufu.”

Mori had perfect 20/20 vision in both eyes, you got that? She just thought girls who couldn’t see were all the rage so she was just playing the part.

After ignoring her, I managed to reach my desk. Every morning lately, I’d be forced to deal with multiple people before I sat down. Thanks to that, my opportunities to exchange greetings with

Kobato-san had gone down. That was the hardest thing to endure. While I had finally reached my seat for the day, the frenzy had yet to stop.

They would cry out to save me, to defeat me, to join forces with me, to warn me.

“Kuh, the fay’s arm is...! Who is it, the holder of such immense spiritual power! (←Apparently me)”

“To think there was someone who could pierce through my Maya Illusionism (←Apparently me)”

“Three months until the dark dakshina activates. Will I be able to find that person (←Apparently me) before then?”

I was surrounded with settings thrown at me left and right.

“Scatter.”

Words weren’t enough to make them falter. To start with, they didn’t have the power to listen to what other people had to say.

They merely excreted their own thoughtless words. They crowded up to throw that excrement at me. Do people have a name for goosebumps that rise without you realizing it?

By the way, when Ryouko arrived, they would briskly retreat. My theory was that as a dream soldier, she outranked the lot of them. Just as a woman might hesitate to stand next to a peerless beauty, a dream soldier would avoid become compared to a higher-end product. That also meant she was the most painful person in class. And when it came to who was in the most pain in our class, that would be yours truly. Pathetic, right?

I’m looking for some empathy here.

“Ephesosmea is a fearsome foe. Even with all twelve knights together.”

“The Akashic record has already ceased to exist. It was shattered and scattered. What I’m trying to say is,”

“She was the greatest scientist under the earth, a genius no doubt... she’s the one who drew the blueprint for my armor.”

“If you call yourself a samurai,”

“Blood,”

“Number one zero eight five, Eddy is a pro in intelligence gathering

and,”

“In an organization called the Krishna secret society,”

Before the fierce surging waves, all I could do was keep up an indifferent resistance.

“Scatter, you bunch of bull.”

The final block of the day, sixth period’s LHR (long homeroom) was a time slot every student restlessly looked forward to. That’s why, had the topic of discussion not been ‘seat changes’, the air would never have gotten so tense.

Seat changes. Once they were decided, it wasn’t so easy to change. An event that could become the critical junction in one’s high school career.

While the teachers seemed to view it lightly, they were all way off. From a student’s point of view, you couldn’t ask for a more important event. Everyone wanted to secure a good seat, and looking at it the other way, they all wanted to sit away from who they didn’t want to deal with. A ‘good seat’ had more to do with who was around you rather than what was around you. If someone who picked on you was stationed nearby, you wouldn’t be able to get a moment’s rest, right? Anyone would want to hang with the people they got along with. Anyone.

Therefore, a discussion on seat changes became a fearsome, passionate whirl of time.

“We’ve reached an impasse. I’d like to respect everyone’s opinion!”

The teacher with authority but no leadership skills, Dorisen grandly declared.

“I’ve got a proposal,” Lord Takahashi stood up. “I’m sure everyone wants to sit with their friends, so how about we arrange seating in group units?”

He didn’t particularly raise his voice, but dream soldiers excluded, everyone took to it fabulously. From everyone’s eyes, it was a proper idea.

“Looks like there’s no objections. Then we’ll go with that.

Takahashi-kun, will you act as chairman?”

In Dorisen’s place, Takahashi stood at the podium. He was mature and dignified, and if he’d only been wearing a suit, I’m sure he could pass as a newly hired teacher.

“Then we should first start by listing out the groups. I’d like a secretary. Yuumin, think you can do it?”

“In your dreams,” Yuumin, Ooshima Yumina curtly refused.

Takahashi could only give a bitter smile. She was a queen, even among friends.

“Koba, why don’t you go for it?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind.”

“Hmm, then I might want to give it a go.”

With a line from each of the three noble ladies, in the end, the one who came out was Imawano Aki, a mixed-race girl. While she was also an outrageous beauty, I was a little scared of her elusive personality. She gave off the impression of quite the experienced gal, the type that would see right through you if you looked at her face to face. Putting a pause on the file grating against her nail, she let the loosely-done hair bundle of hers sway as she rose to the platform.

“I’d rather not touch chalk. Yuuta, tissue please.”

“I don’t have one. Should I ask around?”

“Fine then. I’ll open a new one.”

Imawano promptly ripped one of her own personal pink pocket tissue packets open.

“Alright then—”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.”

Was it an extra thrown in with some brand-name item or something?

With a tissue wrapped around a piece of chalk, “Go ahead,” she turned.

“Then, starting with our group,”

On the blackboard, Takahashi, Yamamoto, Itou, Ooshima, Kobato, Imawano, six names were listed out.

“Next up... Kawai’s, perhaps?”

“We’re...”

Kawai, Kobayashi, Nakamura, Saitou, Watanabe, five names were grouped all together. A group formed as if all the normal boys in class were gathered up. In the end, Saitou was part of them too. I’d been a member, up to a little while ago.

“Oota, are you good being paired with Kosakai?” The ones Takahashi called out to were the so-called open otaku combo. Not in words, the two affirmed with a nod of the head.

“Yoshizawa, any requests?”

“Outside rim. Near the back.”

A silent outlaw with no allegiance to anywhere, Yoshizawa answered with as few words as possible. If anyone in our class was going to kick or punch someone first, it would probably be him or Yamamoto. Takahashi did have an eye on him, and because Yoshizawa didn’t talk with anyone, having him on the outer rim was a relief to everyone concerned.

Now then, here’s the problem. You’ll have to touch what you’ve kept at a safe distance, what will you do, chairman? That being the case, I had a vague premonition of the development to come.

“Then the rest are... Satou’s group, does that work out?”

As expected. You can’t defy fate. I gave just one solemn nod. Conclusion, the group was a large family including myself and seven dream soldier boys.

“Next, the girls’ groups.”

That was also an exceedingly simply result. Apart from the three noble ladies, the normal girls were all put together. Ozaki-san was part of that one.

“Umm, now about the remaining girls... any suggestions?”

Takahashi asked gingerly.

“It might be the Double-Satou group,” I’m reluctant to admit it, but you’re right, Imawano.

“Eh? For reals? All of them?”

And with that, female names were also tacked onto my group. All the nine female dream soldiers, Ryouko included. Add on the boys, and you’ve got sixteen.

The blackboard spelled out the fact half of the class fell under a single group. The creeper division was the largest power in class. The pressure of numbers, once listed, had a perfect impact.

“Waaah,” Takahashi whispered a groan.

“What are we going to do about this? The Satou Group is way too large.”

“Whatever you want. Put it anywhere,” Said I.

The seat change had long since become meaningless to me. Que sera sera, they say.

“R-really? I’ll try to put you guys together as much as possible...”

Going around taking requests from each group, Takahashi and Yamamoto began making a seating chart on paper. From time to time, Ooshima would interject. Kobato-san didn’t join the conversation. When I thought she was hanging her head despondently, I noticed the copy of ‘MariMite’ she was covertly reading in her lap. She had quite some nerve. She was definitely going to make it big someday.

“Aki-chan, could you write this one down?”

The notebook seating chart was copied onto the blackboard. As expected, we were fortified and isolated at the front. There were so many people, it was inevitable we had a large border, giving way to many dream soldiers with bystanders as their neighbors. At once, a few screams rose across the classroom.

“Oh god no!”

The one who cried out in tears was my neighbor Ozaki-san. She was set right next to Ryouko.

“I can’t do it, I told you, I just can’t.”

“But Ozaki-san, you said you wanted to be in the back. There’s really no other configuration that works.”

“If I have to be next to her, I might as well move to the front!”

Oota raised a hand, pleading in a fine voice that ran counter to his bulky build.

“... My eyes are bad. I have to be near the front...”

“Eh? You should’ve said so earlier, Oota.”

“Didn’t I say back outer rim?” Yoshizawa opened his mouth.

Feuding and feuding, how fearsome the seat change. Everyone refused to come in contact with dream soldiers, as the discussion ran into stormy waters. It was rewritten and rewritten, a few cried, a number did snap.

In the end, it came out looking like this:

```

      6 6 6 1
5 5 5 6 6 6
5 5 ■■■ S
4 4 ■■■ S
4 4 ■■■■
2 2 ■■■■

```

With the front of the room being to the left, and group names indicated how many people they consisted of. The ■s were dream soldiers. The S stood for double-Satou. As there would be smoke no matter where Ryouko and I were stationed, we weren't moved anywhere.

As you can see, the dream soldiers sat in the region usually reserved for those in power, with a monopoly over the back-window area. This was largely due to the queen bee asserting, "Too much sunlight, I don't want the window". Unable to ignore Yoshizawa's request, the noble group had a slight skew in their deployment. It was quite a rare pattern for the nobles to be losing out.

With more calm deliberation, there was surely a better arrangement to isolate us, but this is a good example of how confusion and conflicting opinions can paralyze rational judgment. Upon receiving their territory, each group was free to decide how they would sit. With desk and chair in hand, the move had begun. In that rattling, boisterous time, Ryouko and I, the only ones who didn't have to move seemed to be in the eye of the storm.

"I'll ask just in case, but you're fine with where you're sitting, right?"

“Granted positioning is adjacent to Ichirou, the location doesn’t matter.”

“... I see.”

If it was in any way romantic, that would be a wonderful line, but that was a declaration of stalking, it was.

“Ah, a cellphone. Didn’t think you’d have such a social item on hand.”

When I thought she was fiddling with her staff more than usual, I noticed a cellular phone portion that wasn’t there before embedded into the top.

“It is different from the primitive cellphones of this world. An all-purpose device utilized in the Terminal Zone.”

“Yeah, let’s just go with that.”

“Ichirou must submit his contact information.”

“Oh, you want to exchange numbers?” I really didn’t want to.

“It is necessary for emergency contact, and an order for the exchange has already been issued.”

“By whom?”

“Plenipotentiary Power Holder Cred  tat.”

She hoisted up the medal, chain and all.

“And there it is. What does that magic girl toy want with me?”

‘The Plenipotentiary Power Holder Petitions Satou Ichirou. Assist in the Construction of the Hotline.’

“I can see your mouth moving, Ryouko.”

“.....”

“You’re good at ventriloquism, you know that? You really had me fooled... at first.”

“.....”

Tsk, she was ignoring me to my face.

“Satou-kuuun, Satou-kuuun.”

I noticed I was being called for. By the time I realized it, Kobato-san was sitting one seat forward and to the right.

“Huh? That’s where you ended up?”

“That’s right. It just naturally worked out. I’ll be in your care~.”

“... Likewise.” My voice rung false. Clearly, fate had a clever mastery

of the carrot and the stick. With a slightly nervous face, Kobato-san greeted the mystery sitting to the left of me as well.

“I’d love to get to know the other Satou-san too.”

“.....”

Kobato-san was the sole girl to ever strike up conversation with Ryouko. Not that Ryouko ever answered.

“We’ll have to go play somewhere with everyone to commemorate the event~.”

The innocent Kobato-san laughed. Even if it was no more than social courtesy, what a reassuring conversation. That was perhaps the first time in my life I found joy in a seating change. That’s why the stick had to come next. With how delicious that carrot was, just what sort of sublime tragedy awaited me?

The sticking was carried out the next weekend.

As of late, the destiny going that one extra mile to bully me—Mr. Fate was becoming truly merciless, and he had finally reached the point where his splendid programming would destroy my day off, the final paradise I had left.

The tragedy began with a single phone call.

‘Is this Satou? It’s Dorisen. Can you come to the station right now?’

“... I’m pretending that I can’t.”

‘Today’s meeting should prove beneficial for you to spend the rest of your days in peace.’

I hopped right aboard that cajolery, fortifying my body with Jeans Mate, Lord Uniqlo, and Compass, kicking my bike into maximum overdrive all the way to the station.

“Sensei? Where are you?”

The moment I arrived at the meeting point plaza, the sort of beady-eyed vengeful spirit straight out of a Shimizu Takashi horror attacked me in the form of Ryouko.

“Gyaaaah!”

My heart really did stop for a few seconds. My technician took off.

“You——!”

Fear shifted to anger. Grabbing Ryouko's small head in my right hand, I shook her front back, left and right.

"Nom."

"Oww!" She bit me again.

"It's your fault for scaring me!"

When Ryouko showed her selves, the eyes of the people who were only just enjoying their day off pierced into us in one fell motion. Especially since I had raised a scream this time.

"W-what about Dorisen? I got a call, but... why are you here, anyway?"

"The researcher was the one who made the call."

"Hah! That's a lie. I heard the real Dorisen's voice."

"It's love, Mens. We're on the search for love."

"Your mimicry is at a genius level, I see!"

"A simple task with the voice changing functionality of the multipurpose device."

"No, this has nothing to do with machines. It's imitation. I'll hand it to you, you're on an ungodly level."

So it was a trap to lure me out.

"Wait, how did you get my number? I never told you."

"Hacking."

"Liar."

"Social Hacking. Call to Dorisen. Solution obtained."

That really was a fundamental technique of cracking.

Even in the hardest of times, what a wonderful homeroom teacher I had, who'd so easily leak my personal information.

"That's foul play, Ryouko. You've hurt me deep inside. I refuse to search with you in town."

"As Ichirou actively sabotages search attempts, The Researcher has continued the search on her own. Efficiency is exceedingly poor. The Special First Order Advisor Ichirou should promptly rejoin the search and provide backup for his master unit. Habeo imperium. Habeo imperium."

"... Isn't searching school enough? Huh?"

"While a Dragon Terminal definitely exists in school, there have

been readings confirmed in town as well, so no way.”

“Ah, the way you just said no way was really human-like. Spotted a seam in your acting. Hooray, hooray.”

“.....”

Ryouko continuously nudged her shoulder into me. It was a means of protest.

“Hey, don’t push me, that’s dangerous, whoah.”

I was this close to falling into the fountain.

Tearing Ryouko’s body away, I reinitiated negotiations.

“Then where is it in town? You’re always just rambling around places filled with people. If you put so much into this setting, then that dragon terminal of yours is something you made yourself and hid somewhere, right? Let’s head straight for it.”

“Ichirou’s misunderstanding is remarkable. The Dragon Terminal is something that has always existed. Not something that has been made. They are the defensive form a dragon that has lived over a thousand years takes upon a change to its environment. Therefore, their rarity and value are high.”

“I’ve had it with that setting... Zeusheim, and Igknight and the like. It’s bullcrap.”

How was I supposed to be released from this nightmarish chain?

“For starters, that robe... well, it does kinda look like a baggy trench coat, so how about you properly button up the front, and play the part of a bystander?”

‘The Spell-based Concealment ritual a Researcher Utilizes Targets Not Only Residents of the Phenomenal Realm but All Forms of Informational Entities as Well. The Plenipotentiary Power Holder Concludes Satou Ichirou’s Proposal Carries With it No Practicality.’

“... I’m putting a ban on that ventriloquism too.”

The medal was yet another suspicious item. Making sure not to touch it, I tucked it into the inner folds of her robe.

“And hide the staff. Your secret robe will hide it all.”

And with that, she barely managed to play a person who was just wearing slightly baggy clothing... or not! Not at all! It was impossible! Suspicious, she was way too suspicious. An accident

waiting to happen! Admittedly, I knew it was impossible from the start!

“Even Boogiepop-senpai usually hides his outfit in his sports bag! Take a page outta his book!”

Even as that went on, the sniggers of passersby were incessant. I had to run without a moment to spare. From the curious looks, the wry laughs, the condescending glares, the cold sneers, the numerous emotions I didn’t want to be smeared in again, and more than anything, from my detestable past.

Ryouko’s stomach rung out right on the dot.

While she quite likely had a tendency to neglect her health, her body worked properly and would properly signal out its hunger at noon.

“Ryouko, I think we should start with replenishing energy.”

“You may have approval for that request.”

Oh, how high and mighty. But this was a chance to move out of the public eye.

The station’s east entrance was populated with department stores and such making it considerably bustling, but out the west entrance and around five minutes away, the plating of the business district was immediately stripped away. We were only a step up from the stix, it was all to be expected. When you entered the district with nothing but empty lots they planned to erect housing in, the sights immediately changed for the better. People rarely passed by.

“Any convenience stores around?”

Only a small soba shop more like a concrete container for a stall operated by the side of the road. It had the same make as the soba shop in the station.

I entered with Ryouko. While the couple in their fifties sent her a curious look, that was all. Did they interpret it as some incomprehensible fashion that came with the generational gap?

“Eat quietly.”

It wasn’t like Ryouko could choose from a menu. When I was about to place to orders, she pointed out an entry pictured on the back side of the sheet. It was an awfully, awfully rare action.

“What is this?”

“Mn? It’s just assorted tempura soba. Aah, the shrimp’s huge. And pricy. Twelve hundred yen.”

“The shape resembles a dragon.”

Does it now? I get that shrimp can look a bit monster-like, but... don’t tell me that’s the dragon terminal? ... can’t be. If I ordered two of them, it would come out to twenty-four hundred yen.

I drove my thoughts towards the contents of my wallet only to notice I had no further plans to use any of it. I barely bought books for my own amusement anymore, I had no hobbies, and I wasn’t going anywhere with friends.

“... Two assorted tempura soba.”

Eventually, two orders on trays arrived. Obstructing Ryouko’s hand that reflexively burst out, I furnished it with chopsticks.

“Irrational implement.”

“Oh shut it. Everyone worked hard to get used to it.”

In the midst of a hard battle, without laying an eye on the noodles, Ryouko bit into a shrimp tempura. The plate of assorted tempura had two shrimp in the center, with the sides made of up breaded kisu, pumpkin and shiso leaf. In no time at all, the two shrimp had disappeared into the witch’s stomach. She seemed satisfied as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“You’ve never eaten shrimp tempura before?”

“The food of the phenomenal realm is irrational in its—”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.”

With the harshness of a producer axing an unpopular anime, I forcefully severed the conversation.

“More importantly, how about you try something else.. The kis,” saying that one aloud took a bit of courage. “The kish fish tempura’s good too,” of course, I bit my tongue.

While it was a seedy-looking store, the taste was surprising. Hand-made noodles were boiled in store, giving a resilience one could never find in dry preserved stock, all topped with a seemingly endless stream of finely minced green onion and sesame. The dancing consistency made for an all-around enjoyable experience. If

you brought a tempura to your mouth in the interval between slurps, the crisp, dry coating shattered to a weightless texture. Even Ryouko whose only interests went out to the shrimp, upon seeing the joy spread across my face, painstakingly brought a noodle to her mouth. Her eyes opened wide. The movements of her hand sped up.

Even the supporting cast, the shiso leaf was appetizing enough to down a bowl of rice to. Ryouko nibbled her tempura in small bits like a squirrel. Creepy-cute, I'd say. If I saw that on TV, I might laugh.

The old woman laid out two vermillion-lacquered containers. Ryouko didn't let it escape her. She drew her eyes point blank to investigate the object from top to bottom.

"It's just occurred to me, but your acting kinda rips off a person from that Hit and Run manga."

"Necessity to investigate this article accepted."

As a dream soldier boasts high mental defense values, low-offense retorts inflict no damage.

"... It's soba water. The water used to boil the noodles."

"Industrial waste."

"You wanna get thrown out?" Though if it was just her, I wouldn't mind.

"After you've eaten all the noodles, you mix in as much broth as you like, and sip it. It's like tea after a meal."

Ryouko carelessly tilted the container and spilled its contents.

"...! ...!"

"Stupid," the area quickly formed a breakwater for it.

"Don't play with your water, idiot!"

The old woman looked troublesomely at us.

I'd taken a liking to the store so I wanted to eat here again, but I decided I'd be coming alone next time.

As I was paying the bill, I noticed an item I'd seen somewhere before in the 'lost and found corner' by the register. A metal stick. The engravings on it had been worn down shallow, it was in tatters. Where had I seen it again?

The infirmary. A light lit up overhead.

"If you like it, you can take it," the old man said as he typed out our total.

"Really? It's not like I'm the one who lost it."

"That's been here forever. I'm pretty sure it's a toy. Go ahead."

With a wry smile, I tried returning it to the box when Ryouko jumped at it. She grew violent.

"Hey! Customer! Eep, human? Ghost? The grudge!?"

Her means of attack was completely like a vengeful spirit, so I could understand his confusion. By the way, *The Grudge* is a movie of unfortunate events involving an endlessly replicating curse. It's one of Director Shimizu Takashi's works.

"Eeeh! Police, you have to call the poliiiice!"

"You can! You'll just spread the curse! Like the Mamiya Couple from *Sweet Home*, you have to exorcize her with emotion... you have to make her reach nirvana!"

Was the store owner some horror movie buff?

"Just what are you!?" Snapping, I cried out as well.

"Ah ah ah ah ah!"

While she was always crazy, today was a full boost. As if she had awakened.

In a crisis, a protagonist or heroine surrounded in mystery would generally go berserk and awaken. And annihilate the enemy. It was the golden pattern to liven up a story. If it actually occurred in the real world, there was nothing more painful to watch.

Ryouko tore the stick out of my hands, slammed her shoulder into the door, and took off in a straight dash, the glass bell ringing all the way.

Once he'd calmed down, the old man (it seemed his suspicious of evil spirits had cleared up) handed over my change as he spoke out.

"... Could you two please not come again?"

"... Got it."

Chasing Ryouko in a mad dash, I came onto her.

“Vile witch! Did someone put you up to it!?”

While it hadn’t gone far enough to lay a hand on her, if I didn’t put the stick back, I’d never be able to move on. It became a violent scramble.

“Gnnnnnnn!” “Ngaaaah!”

It developed into a truly small-scale close combat of grabbing each other’s hair and cheeks. On brand new road piercing through a tranquil vacant lot, our street fight remained too petty to require anything like a 10-something shiki: yamibarai special move.

Really, I’m sorry I can’t provide a cool light novel battle scene.

Vrm, rm, rm, rmm, from a sports car letting off motor noises as it passed by, a flashy couple pointed at us and laughed.

The man yelled out his encouragement.

“Go get her, Otaku!”

Go get in an accident.

When I’m with Ryouko, it seems even I’m seen as an otaku. My high school debut was meaningless.

Eventually out of breath, the battle ended with no real end. Leaning against one of the stakes surrounding the lot, I became a lifeform that existed only to ingest oxygen. I couldn’t regain the stick.

“God, what’s with you. You’re really irritating. What even is that rod?”

“Dragon Terminal.”

“Say what?”

That stick? That? You’re saying that’s the item we were desperately searching for?

“Let me see it a second.”

“..... You’ll take it so no.”

“I won’t take it, I’ll give it back, just let me see. We’re comrades, right?”

Perhaps the comrades part worked; Ryouko held it out to me.

Dragon Terminal. Now that she mentioned it, it did seem to have the shape of a dragon. Rather than a western dragon, it was closer to the eastern serpent-like beast. It could also look like a worm or

something of the sort. It didn't seem to have wings.

"Alright, have it back."

She carefully tucked it into a storage space in her staff.

How baffling. Even if the dragon corpse part was a lie, I was surprised to find it actually existed. Why were there multiple of them? How many were there in total? The key had to be in the infirmary.

I stopped by the infirmary the following lunch break.

The nurse with a fluffy, short, blonde perm sat in her swivel chair, her toes stretched out, kicking back as she washed down some konjac jelly with the working woman's water of choice, Contrex, all the while indulging in a volume of 'The Story of Saiunkoku'. I held down my swelling negative aura. An adult her age... no, I remember reading on the net that older women read Saiunkoku too. That's beside the point.

"Feeling sick?"

"No, I'm here for something else."

I gazed over the room, searching out the item in question.

It was still on the desk, resting in a milky white pen tray. The seal case.

"About that metal stick from last time, could you please tell me about it?"

"I don't think I can help you with that anymore."

"Stuff happened. If possible, I want you to give that to me." I pointed at the case.

"Now I can't do that."

"Umm, right now, I'm kinda helping out a girl who's looking for it, and to be blunt, I need it."

"That's a crime, pretty sure."

"Say what?" That wasn't my intent. "I highly doubt that."

The nurse reached out and took the seal case in her hand.

"You can do anything as long as you have this. It might be able to grant any wish you may have."

“Sensei, are you for real? You’re a teacher and you still believe in that stuff?”

“Of course. I believe. In the incredible potential this carries... the golden force.”

“Golden force.”

Another outrageous setting came out.

It wasn’t just Ryouko, it had even reached a third party. Though she said it was a charm, so it’s probably got to do with that. Was this a far deeper incident than I was thinking?

“For example, let’s say you want some money. Your wish will be granted.”

“No way,” that’s like trying to reach for the clouds.

“For example, let’s say you want to ruin a certain someone’s life. It can grant that wish too.”

“... So it’s a curse.”

“That’s right, you can’t make light of the power this carries. If you use it for evil, someone will definitely come out the worse.”

“Then why do you keep it with you? If it’s that dangerous, you should go through the proper process.”

The last trace of emotion disappeared from the nurse’s face.

“... I, see, I want a car. I want a Nissan Bluebird Sylphy.”

“No, sensei, don’t tell me... you’re going to use that dragon terminal to...?”

“Now you’re getting it! I intend to use the magic wand. And I’ll lay hands on my Sylphy-chan. That’s why I can’t give it to you.”

Unfitting of the acting nurse, that’s a grim look, is it not? To think I would find such great evil lurking here.

“I can’t overlook this. I’ll need to take charge of it. Please hand it over.”

“Definitely not. You can’t have it.”

With childish gestures, she hid it behind her back.

“If an educator like yourself is going to abuse a curse... I’ll leak you to Mu and Dragon Magazine.” Though when I was the one who said it, “This is stupid,” I thought.

“To start with, the Sylphy’s a granny car... even a Mark X would...”

The nurse suddenly made the face of the demon's bride.

"You take that back! Sylphy-chan is nice on all the ladies! So what if I just like the name!? By the way, Sylphy is the spirit of the wind.

There's Undine of the water and Dryad of the forest too, and then there's the high-level spirit Ifrit, right? They help out the elves!"

"The likes of Sylphy is just barroom trivia. Everyone knows that."

This person was definitely reading *The War of Lodoss* or something.

By the way, I've accidentally bought the *Siege of Rhodes* (by Shiono Nanami) instead before. While it wasn't what I was looking for, it was interesting enough to get my nose running. Albeit, it was a novel based in actual history, so it didn't have any spirits.

"You can't have it. You can't have it," holding the case close, she fled onto the bed.

"If it's corrupted you to such a degree, I can't ignore my civic duty as a citizen of Japan. I'm confiscating that."

I leaped at the nurse. As I struggled, my face buried deep into her chest, and from the gap in her shirt, I took in a large whiff of an older woman's perfume. While the inside of my head was covered up in pink impulse, I used sheer willpower to prioritize my goal.

"Please give it to me."

"Not in a million years."

"Yo doc, I wanna cut class and nap, please lend me a bed!" The flashy-haired second-year student who came in took one look at us grappling on the bed, "Wahey, it's just like those spicy fanfics! Hey everyone, get a load 'a this!" she cried as she raced down the hallway.

"Chance!"

"Ah, he got it."

In that moment's opportunity, I took back the case and shot back from the bed.

"Now look here, I'm starting to think you're misunderstanding something."

"As for what's inside... wait, what?"

The case contained a real seal stamp.

"Right? You misunderstand, right? That's my real official seal."

“Then what about when I saw it last time?”

“The cases just happen to look a little similar, it’s something completely different. I already told you, I can’t help. By the way, I’m buying a car after this. Sylphy. The contract needs my seal.”

“What about the curse? The golden force? Someone’s going to end up for the worse if it’s misused?”

“Curse → The seal’s undeniable ability to serve as evidence. Golden force → the legally binding force of monetary contract. Misuse → It points to me, if you use it in crime, I’m ruined.”

“Are you being purposely misleading!? Then where did that stick go?”

“I gave it to a female student.”

“Who and why?”

“It’s just that sort of charm, you’re supposed to pass it on. I gave it to a girl who looked like she needed it. She’s a first year, so I haven’t learned her name yet.”

So it was passed to one of the first year girls. A somber mood took me.

“Are there any more like that one?”

“I don’t know the specifics. But it seems there’ve been charms like that around town for a while now.”

I see, so Ryouko assimilated some trendy good luck charm into her delusion. I’m starting to see it.

“Were you in need of some luck?”

“Not particularly, but I have my reasons.”

“What sort?”

This girl who wanted to become one of those people from manga and novels who fight on the underside of daily life so much that she convinced herself she’s a witch is interested in it, ahahahah. There was no way I could give that explanation. With an ambiguous smile, I made my escape from the infirmary.

End of the day homeroom. As per usual, Dorisen waltzed in with a full smile on his face.

Lately, I'd gotten to noticing his smile was either faked, or something close to that. The strong aura he emitted on rare occasion told me of a deeper truth.

The amount of a person's aura is roughly proportional to their human power.

Human power is a word to indicate a human's humanish humanity to other humans.

For example, for someone with high human power, even with a mountain of evidence against them for the murder they committed, "No, I don't know anything. Really, cut me some slack. Yeaah, I'm just not seeing it." It was possible for them to continue insisting as such. Even in a harsh situation, a strong will to conceal one's true nature, and (in a sense) a noble spirit unbound by the fetters of logic. Therefore, a bearer of strong human power could by no means divulge their true thoughts to others. As was the case with Dorisen.

While the pro soccer manager Yamamoto said something similar, the nuances were different.

With all his authority, as expected, Dorisen boasted high human power. In political maneuvers, it would prove to be an indispensable force.

"And that's the end of it. I'll see you all tomorrow."

Once the standing and the bowing was over, I would escape the classroom with all due haste. Otherwise, the dream soldiers would grow concerned over whatever so crisis the world was in today.

Gathering around me as if it were set in law.

By leaving the classroom during breaks, fleeing to the cafeteria or library during lunch, and swiftly returning after school, I'd succeeded in living a peaceful day to day as of late. The only measures I lacked was for the morning.

Since I didn't have friends, killing time over lunch was a difficult task, but I'd started managing these days.

I'll make it home today, just you watch. As I got full of myself, Dorisen kindly informed me.

"Ah, double-Satou, please stay behind. Then, today's day duty,

please do your thing.”

“... What is this?”

After the class had broken up, I remained in attendance with Ryouko.

Because I remained, approximately half of the class remained at attention in their seats. Those waiting for us. My popularity didn't make me happy in the slightest. Once I finished talking with Dorisen, if I didn't make a straight dash for the front door, I could feel it in the air I'd be quickly apprehended.

“You've been pretty flaky lately, haven't you?”

“Flaky? With who?”

“Ladies' Satou and your other friends.”

“Other what?” after activating my repeat function, I finally got it.

“Other friends? Did I have anyone like that? You and Ryouko are the only people recorded in my cellphone.”

“Oh, so you actually do have her in your phone. That's great news, great news. But just two entries sounds too lonely. How about it, Mens. Do you want to try increasing that count by fourteen?”

“Fwihhic!”

I think that was supposed to be an uncanny laugh. Fourteen. To me, it was a value far more sinister than the beast's sign of 666.

“I firmly refuse. If anything, I'd like it to drop to 0.”

“They're all comrades of the same Satou Group. What's not to like?”

“This group's just what's been made of the class's rubbish bin.”

“Hahaha, now that's a terrible thing to say.”

“It's because they had no intent to properly associate with their classmates. I can only say they reaped what they sowed.”

All they wanted was to smash whatever proud setting they came up with onto some understanding sap. They were convinced that was cool. They thought acting like some warrior from another world was akin to wearing fashionable clothing. Nothing more than a distorted, infantile lust for the limelight.

“So you don't intend to get along with them?”

“I don't,” I declared plain and loud so those behind me could hear.

“Mens' Satou, do you know this proverb? One rotten apple spoils

the bunch.”

“I’ve at least heard it.”

“Truth be told, there are some suspicions of obscene acts in the infirmary surrounding a student in my class.”

He took me by surprise.

“It was a love scene right out of a spicy fanfic, I heard.”

“.....”

“If we really had such a student, there’s no way they’d be able to escape suspension. Just one push, and even expulsion isn’t a stretch of the imagination. Oh no, what’s wrong, Satou? Your complexion’s going stale.”

“... Err, am I being threatened?” My tone shot all over the place.

“Nah. It’s just abuse of power.”

“Oh, so that’s it... hahah... you’re quite a joker, sensei, man... hahahah.”

I could perceive Dorisen’s aura expanding. Being bullied to high heavens had tempered my ability to read the atmosphere, if nothing else. Ability name: Air Reader. If I had to, I could even express it numerically. Currently, Dorisen’s aura was roughly 120Hu (Human units). A normal adult male has a human power of around 30-40Hu, so Dorisen’s was already several times over normal.

“Instead of running away, can you deal with Ladies’ Satou and the others upfront?”

“..... Got it.”

All of a sudden, countless hands reached out and grabbed me from behind, pulling me into the midst of the legion. With sights such a vivid reminder of a zombie movie, Dorisen alone with his special box seat up close, appreciated the film with a smile. And my after-school time—was violated by delusions.

When the break-time bell rung, I immediately stood to go out to the hall. That alone was something I wouldn’t concede even if threatened, and investigating the charm was tied to Ryouko’s case regardless. Thankfully, I managed to escape today. I set about my

independent investigation.

The first year had five classes, ranging from A to E. I stretched my feet to Class E, directly opposite to the A classroom. It was to strike up a conversation with whatever girl I found randomly having a snack.

Hey, would you look at that? A bullied kid (and now a loner) is talking to a girl. It's like I'm a pickup artist or something. Class E was distant, so the rumors about me hadn't even reached yet. If I played my cards right, they'd even talk to me normally. There was no need to be discouraged if I was turned down, I could just talk to another girl. I never had these sorts of social interactions before. Humans can change if they really put their mind to it, right? Albeit, if anything, my precedent proves, even if you change, that doesn't mean you'll succeed.

"Hey, I'm looking into good luck charms. Do you know anything?"

"... Good luck charms?"

While I was usually rejected, there were times I'd get an answer. As long as one out of five people said something back, I knew I was in luck. If I kept polishing the skill, I might actually be capable of pickups someday. I can search for a girlfriend outside of school with no qualms. Isn't that wonderful? My motivation was on the up and up.

"One that uses a silver metal stick, you ever heard of it?"

"Stick? I don't think I have."

"It was apparently kept in a seal case."

"Sorry, I really don't know."

Even if conversation was established, it usually yielded zero results. It was only classes D and E that my ill reputation had failed to reach, and around class C, they had started pointing at me with some choice words. Speaking to efficiency, these two classes were best for gathering information.

"I see, sorry for holding you up. Thank you."

How many times did that make it? If I didn't find the dragon terminal, I'd be Ryouko's toy forever. My head hurt just thinking about it.

Break time between classes was a brief ten minutes. Talking to more than a few people would already put me in overtime. I could likely only reach out to one more this time around. My eyes raced to find who the last person I'd talk to would be.

My eyes locked onto a girl acting out a flower on the wall as she fiddled with her phone. I'd seen her face a few times before. She was always alone.

"Do you have a minute?" If it was just starting a conversation, it barely took any courage anymore.

"... Me?"

While she looked surprised, she promptly folded her phone and turned towards me. From the mild gratitude I picked up from her expression, she must have been looking for something to spend her free time on.

"I'm looking into good luck charms. One that uses a silver rod."

"Charms. Silver rod."

"It's apparently trendy with girls. My sister's researching local trends for a college report, and she told me to go gather some data at school."

I nonchalantly threw out a lie. It looks like my human power's risen from middle school.

"Do you mean..." she tapped away at her phone again before showing it to me. "This?"

She was connected to the net, so I thought she'd searched up an occult site or something, but judging by the letters lining the black background of the small screen, this was one of those so-called internet message boards.

"Our school's underground site. It's pretty new."

"So we had something like that... an underground site."

"We used to have another one, but it was spammed with porn and taken down."

Her intonation was bounding. I know this is a rude notion, but I'm pretty sure this was her first conversation in a while, and she was in high spirits. It made me feel like I was using her, making my chest a little tight.

Making friends takes nerve, but if you fail, you end up feeling like this girl.

Is it bad that it's embarrassing to be alone? While it had to do with the school I was still attending, I couldn't see any solution to the societal problem. All I could tell was that what the adults were up to was always 'a little off'. If only those powerful people like Takahashi could just get together and resolve it. But I guess that's not happening.

"Look. It came out in completely irrelevant gossip, right?"

I immediately found the post.

'Hey, has anyone here done that dragon's nail legend? The one that curses you.'

"Dragon's nail?"

"Right. It's mentioned here and there," the girl seemed to want to talk more and more.

"Umm, it's like this town's specific variation of Kokkuri-san. You'll find pretty much the same legends all over schools in this area, and the topic came up on other schools' underground sites as well."

She's checking the underground sites of other schools. She must have a lot of time on her hands.

"So it's a charm for our town alone."

"And what's used is the dragon's nail. It's an essential item. To put it simply—"

There are multiple dragons nails, either in someone's possession, or hidden in various places across town. Someone who wants good luck should do their best to get a nail. The nail has the power to grant wishes, and just carrying it with you will have an effect. No need for any troublesome rituals. No initiation fee or annual payments. Spells these days have really upped the game in usability. When your wish is granted, or you see signs that it's working, you have to relinquish the nail. Otherwise, you'll receive its curse. And so once again, the important item slips back into town.

"Hmmm. Does the nail have any rules for relinquishing it? So it doesn't get tossed?"

“You’re sharp. There are. You can’t just throw it away, it has to be in a spot where someone will definitely find it someday. And it has to be within the scope of this town. You can’t take it out.”

“Otherwise a curse?”

“Yep. You’re cursed. When you have it in hand, it works on its own, but the risks are high.”

So it’s one of those charms with a fluid nature. The dragon stake would continue granting wishes as it circulated around town. Whether it was handed off or hidden somewhere wasn’t set in stone.

“What sort of places are they usually hidden in?”

“Now that’s something that doesn’t come out on the boards too often. You can’t use the same place twice, after all. Though they sometimes say I hid it in so and so.”

“Heheheh.” The information just keeps coming. Loner girls are the best. Adorable.

“Now about the nails, there are quite a few of them.”

“Hmhmm,” I did witness two separate articles.

“If you’re researching them, I’m sure you’d like to see a real one, but they’re cursed, so perhaps you shouldn’t stick a hand in too carelessly.”

“But you know, hypothetically, even if they do grant wishes, if you hide it in the wrong place, someone who doesn’t know anything might find it and throw it out.”

“That’s also a cause to be cursed; so lately, a lot of people post on the net if they’ve hidden one.”

“I see. So I’ll have to monitor the site in real time if I want one.”

“Ah, but. If you just want to see it,” The more I talked with this girl, the more information she gave me.

“The dragon nails are still just metal, so they can wear down from time to time. When that happens, you’re supposed to offer it to the shrine.”

“And then what happens?”

“Who knows... I’m not really... but it’s a dragon and all, so once its role is over, won’t it ascend to the heavens? Also, it’s a shrine, so the

god might look after it and replenish its power or something?”

“Hahah, I see.”

Perhaps there really is mystery in the world. I was getting incorrigibly restless.

“Do you know where the shrine is?”

“Yeaaaaaaah,” The girl’s expression turned dark. “Sorry, I don’t know yet.”

“By yet, you mean you might figure it out eventually?”

The girl thought to herself. The warning bell rung. During our break time, the bell would ring a minute before classes begin.

“... I might. I check the site quite faithfully.”

I put my hands together and lowered my head.

“Please, if you do find out, could you tell me?”

“Sure, how can I contact you?”

“Could you send it to my phone?”

“No problem. Let’s exchange numbers.”

Well, would you look at that? That was the fair and proper way to exchange cell phone numbers. I rock.

I gave my thanks and returned to class.

The investigation was proceeding favorably. But another problem was emerging where I least expected it. Right at the moment I was away.

The moment my hand reached the classroom door, my body winced back at the shrill shriek that escaped the room.

Someone was yelling out, angrily. It was a familiar fear. The space known as the classroom could, at times, turn terribly cruel. All sorts of ill intent could easily and completely change the everyday life one had lived to that day. In a sense, it was an actual other world brought forth by the human heart.

Open the door, and I’d be involved. I wanted to run. I seriously considered waiting here for the teacher, waiting for him to tell me, “Satou, what are you standing around there for?” As far as I could see, it was the best decision.

But strange—

The ominous sensation permeated through the door. This wasn't any normal bullying. It wasn't just some fight. With angry roars overlapping with one another, I couldn't make anything out. While there was no mistake things were stormy inside, I couldn't imagine what I'd see. Enter, and I couldn't play dumb anymore. There was no mistake, this had to be trouble tied to the dream soldiers. I should ignore it. Waiting for the teacher was correct.

When I was sure my mind thought so, as if my heart and body were acting separately, they took the opposite action. The door slid open. For a moment, I wondered if it was some sort of automatic door, but what opened it was my own hand. What a shocking betrayal.

A large harmonious aura became a squall to blow over me.

The emotional discharge was definitely there. Students of class 1-A were split right down the middle into two camps, facing one another across an invisible wall. Barely anyone was sitting. A number of desks had been knocked over, chairs lining the floor as well. The one furthest on the outside looked at me. It was Kawai.

"Kawai, what's this?"

"... Don't ask me."

Only the ruins of a lost friendly relation escaped his mouth. I wasn't going to get down over it this late in the game. I tried measuring the situation with my own power.

Ryouko stood at the center of the dispute. While those around her raised a ruckus, she alone gazed into space, detached from it all.

When I saw that her costume was a little disheveled, some unknown emotion inflated within me. Her hair was frayed. Her prided staff had been broken in two.

As if to sandwich her, the dream soldier brigade and the commonfolk faced one another.

"And I'm telling you you're creepy! Try saying something that isn't nonsense!"

The shrill voice belonged to Ooshima Yumina. She was half-snapped in a way unimaginable from her usual calm and egotistical state. There was Yamamoto to her side, his anger also bared, "Think

you're hot stuff? Lookin' down on me? Takin' us for fools?" or so he repeated.

Of the bystander camp, those two were the only ones raising their voice. Takahashi was in the center as well, but he kept to himself with a sullen face.

The dream soldiers had gathered on the opposite shore.

As you're aware, they held not the power to stand against the common man. They stood up in silence, their eyes alone wandering about. What a bizarre scene. The only one standing by Ryouko's side was the eyepatched swordswoman Oda. It was hard to say she was sticking up for her. Even as she took a harsh attitude with me as she played the stern warrior character, as with the others, she lacked the communication ability to keep any normal person company. With tears in her eyes, she cathed her being in the jeers of Ooshima's flock. From time to time,

"Nay," "We art not at fault," "It is you who," but each time she tried to say something, the corners of Ooshima's eyes would lift up.

"I'm telling you to talk normally. Nay, art, stop screwing around, seriously!"

So that's it. The details aside, I was starting to see a faint picture of how it got to this.

"Satou-kun!" With a pale face, Kobato-san came over.

"It blew up."

"What started it?"

"At first, Yuumin cautioned her that she should wear her uniform, but Satou-san ignored her. When she laid a hand on her staff, Satou-san really hated it, and..."

The staff currently contained the dragon terminal. Even if I was the one who did it, Ryouko would have shown an excessive reaction.

"And Ooshima got in a bad mood?"

"Yeah. And then, from not wearing a uniform, it went to not being able to talk properly, and she kept on prodding and prodding at that sort of thing... until it wasn't just to Satou-san, it was to everyone... eventually, Oda-san stepped between them, and then Yamamoto-kun suddenly snapped and..."

I'm sure it was just some trivial teasing.

Just by knowing their own status, a noble will talk down to a majority of people. Those who don't submit become a target of criticism for that alone. Not only that, when it came to Ryouko and the others' attitudes, there was no higher tier of arrogance. Trouble was inevitable, a natural reprise. At the very least, had I been there, "And take that silly blindfold off," Ooshima said with her pressure at full throttle.

"... I mustn't."

"Why not? You can see fine, right?"

"... This is... a... seal..."

"Aah? What? Are you saying that because you're an idiot? Or is it because you think I'm an idiot?"

Oda lost her words, she could only hand her head.

"Oy, Oda, look at me. Why are you averting your eyes, wench? You were ordered to remove your blindfold."

Yamamoto pursued the matter. That pressure must have been hard on a girl. As she hung her head, silent droplets fell from the corner of her eye. Of course, from beneath the blindfold as well.

"Don't ignore me!"

"....."

"Take it off!"

"....."

"... Remove it."

Yamamoto's voice went low and cold. Once you raise a fist too high, you reach a point where you would have to lower it somewhere. The same went for a fist full of emotion. Would Yamamoto hit even a woman? And if he could, and then what?

I was presumably the leader of the dream soldier brigade. It was an unwilling station Dorisen stuck me in. A job far harsher than class representative. I dealt with Ryouko who wasn't even my friend. I'd offered up more than enough of my free time.

That's why, I had absolutely no obligation to help anyone, and jumping out in front of an angry Yamamoto was none too appealing. Even if I completely ignored it, I was in a position where

that was forgivable. I mean, from the start, I hated people like them too.

“How about you calm down, both of you?”

Kobato-san left my side, letting out a scratchy voice.

“... Kobato, you’ve got nothing to do with this. Stay out. I’m not satisfied yet.”

“But...”

“You can’t follow along with your friends, Koba? Aki’s staying back, right? Everyone who’s not got a complaint is keeping away. Can’t you see that?”

“Well away,” Imawano Aki frivolously raised her hand. Rather, she was the only one sitting in her seat. Kobato-san struggled to find the right words. Ooshima gently rephrased herself.

“This isn’t really bullying. They’re not wearing their uniforms, so I courteously issued a warning. These two are the only ones who aren’t reflecting on their behavior. Koba, there’s no need for you to get in a tizzy. Go over to Aki. You can sit in my seat.”

It looks like Ooshima doted on Kobato-san quite a bit. She amicably gave her detailed instructions, causing her to lower her shoulders with no room left to refute. Ooshima tossed her voice over to the opposite side.

“For now, all of you, everyone who’s breaking school regulation, everyone who’s brought in illegal stuff, get rid of it all. Don’t you think it’s unfair that you’re the only ones who can do whatever you want?”

The warriors kept silent. Hey, fight.

“Oda, you’re up first. Take off that eyepatch.”

Oda remained frozen. What happened to the Oda Style Demon Lord of the Sixth Heaven Blade?

“... Oda-san, I think you’re better off doing what she says.”

Determining he wouldn’t be able to look good to all side, Takahashi started taking Yamamoto’s side.

“I’ll get rid of that for you,” Yamamoto grabbed Oda’s ponytail and pulled up her face. Upon seeing her teary expression, he laughed.

“What are you crying for? This is stupid.”

His hand touched the eyepatch. Oda let loose an ear-piercing scream.

“Stop that at once, Yamamoto-kun!” Finally, a single dream soldier stood. It was Kinoshita of the white cloth.

“It’s unbecoming for a man to use brute force on a woman! You needn’t let it bother you, by our prediction, the cause of this quarrel spans dimensions to—”

Around the dimensional spanning part, my spine froze over. That’s why. That’s why I just couldn’t sympathize. While I hated Ooshima, her request was just. The ones at fault were the cosplayers. I wasn’t some shrewd lawyer who could make the impossible possible. More so, I was the opposite. A dream soldier’s... enemy, right?

That wasn’t the convoluted statement of a tsundere. I’m being serious.

I despise it. That childish desire to be noticed, that immature spirit, those careless statements. That foolish lack of defenses. Everyone put in the effort to become ‘normal’. There was no salvation for those who abandoned the very notion of effort, who contracted this get-out-of-jail-free notion of ‘heroism’. They should just be destroyed.

That’s why, when Yamamoto’s fist buried into Kinoshita’s stomach, I wasn’t moved in the slightest. The man who would one day reign over the world congress let out a shameful moan as he crouched down. I even felt a pleasant rush to see warriors were all the same in the face of violence. With the powerful kick of a soccer club star, Kinoshita was on his back like a pathetic turtle.

Ozaki-san’s quiet “Get him” approval sounded especially loud.

“And that’s one small fry down.”

Once again, his hand reached for Oda. As I expected, Yamamoto was the type who’d really do it. Oda shrunk her body in fear. That was for the best. Some part of me felt relieved. Give up any pointless resistance; don’t instigate him, just let it end quickly. From experience, I could say that no matter what sort of bullying, as long as you don’t resist, it’ll be over by the time you’re stripped naked. If they wanted to be warriors so bad, they could’ve gathered

at their own homes. They could have exchanged texts.

Yamamoto's hand reached for a powerless Oda. After they'd seen Kinoshita's ship sunk in two shots, not a single dream soldier could stand anymore. No signs of anyone helping. Not a peep from me either.

"Ow!"

The cry belonged to Yamamoto. Holding his hand that had been smacked down, he took a few steps back. The hero who saved Oda was—Ryouko.

While the shaft had broken, the staff's crown was a mass of metal parts, making for a splendid blunt weapon. She had intercepted the hand with it. With the same tempo as ever, Ryouko said this.

"... Reboot successful."

Perhaps because I was still a child, I was sometimes possessed by emotions I couldn't identify. For example, the goosebumps racing down my body at that moment, were they the same physiological revulsions as usual... or perhaps...?

"Woman... don't mess with me. I'll kill you."

Yamamoto snapped. Would Ryouko be struck? Would that small frame of hers be able to accept the violence of a man? I doubt she'd get off safe.

To Kobato-san who had returned nearby, I tried asking my final question I didn't have to ask.

"How did they treat Ryouko at first?"

They tried to take off her clothes, her robe... and she started struggling... so Yamamoto-kun got angry and grabbed her hair, and snapped her staff.

Ah, dammit, it went and established itself. A reason to defend her. You freaking started this, Retardmoto.

"Tsunderes aren't really my thing."

"Eh?"

Pushing my way through, I stepped between Yamamoto and Ryouko. Touching aggressively pushing my body against him, I enraged him further. Yamamoto must not have been used to being attacked, he gazed at me with a blank look on his face.

“... You, Sayou! What’s that? Huh? Wanna go at it? Wanna go two on one!?”

Yamamoto immediately grabbed my collar. When he threatened me up close, I could easily discern his bullying prowess. Yamamoto’s build was overly slim. It didn’t seem he had too much power. If I had to rank him, he’d barely nudge in at number ten, at most. With all my experience, my punch resistance alone was high, pathetically enough.

I coldly informed Yamamoto’s dark red face.

“You’re the small fry. Know your place.”

“.....?”

What chemical reaction occurred in the depths of his brain? His expression went limp. I couldn’t tell whether he was laughing or angry, this was the look of a person who had lost control.

I was rising to cloud nine. I managed to say what I never could in my middle school days. I wanted to say more.

“Did you just,”

I placed emphasis on the approaching face.

“Your breath stinks, Yamamoto.”

And like that, I was auspiciously punched in the stomach. It wasn’t my solar plexus, and I was bracing myself, so I endured it. While my breathing stopped, as long as you know it’s coming, you can keep pain out of your mind. That being the case, I was rendered unable to speak, so looking him right in the eye, I made my best smile of the year (sadly, a cynical one).

“The, ya—!”

Raising his voice so much I could no longer tell what he was saying, he punched my face. A nostalgic sensation permeated my cheek. When you’re being hit, truth is, the scariest part is the leadup. After that, it might hurt, but as your mind is often stunned, you usually get off easy.

Yamamoto’s punches with as big of a windup as he could muster visited me in rapid succession. While I took a few hits, I grew accustomed along the way, managing to avoid and block a few of them. The man crying out as he struck me, and then there was me

silently being struck. What even is this, this guy isn't used to punching at all. His face punches aren't even breaking my teeth, at this rate, his rank ten is going to be suspect.

Now then, what next? Waiting for the teacher was the ironclad rule, but it would be interesting to get just one blow in myself. It would be irritating if it was determined both sides were to blame. Whether it would go well or not, I measured my timing and tried just once. I pretended to collapse as I braced my knees, kicking the floor, and plunging my head in. A tackle.

My headbutt flew in a lower trajectory than expected, sinking me into Yamamoto's stomach. While I took a considerable impact to the neck, I could feel the sensation of hitting right into his center of balance. Gephew, I heard his lungs gasping. Yamamoto's body collapsed back as he smacked into the wall below the blackboard. Perhaps because I had timed it with his own advance, I managed quite a clean hit. Just like that, I feigned a dying breath as I curled up.

Yamamoto mounted my body, he started lowering a punch at my back. But he didn't have any power left. It was an exhausted punch. Inside of my armadillo crouch, I laughed.

I did it. Now punch me all you want. The teacher will be here soon. "What are you doing!? Get off of him!"

Yep, and there it is. Good work everyone. I appreciate your service. "Yama, stupid, hey stop it!" Takahashi pulled Yamamoto back in a Nelson.

"This is terrible... hey, are you conscious? Alright, I'll call the nurse. You're going straight to the counseling room. Someone get Dorisen-kun here!"

What a wonderful development. It was as if I'd just reclaimed all my bad fortune.

"What is... this..."

Ooshima Yumina's desolate voice now rung a soothing tune to me. Within the day, Yamamoto was suspended, and I was sent to a doctor by way of the infirmary. While I had taken a few blows, I didn't suffer any conspicuous injuries. My parents who came to get

me went and made their own ruckus of, “My son’s not to blame anymore,” in tears, and more than anything else, it was awkward. I took just a day off from school to be safe. Surfing the net at home, indulging in depravity was the best.

The next day, when I popped by the dining table, it seemed a family meeting had just ended. My parents and sister. Three grave faces forced their smiles upon me. My father spoke as a representative. “Do you want to transfer schools?” He said with the sort of light tone one asked, ‘Do you want to try shedding some sweat in the little leagues?’

“No, I’m fine. I’m not having any problems.”

“You don’t have to hold it in, you know?” said my mother, “Your father can finish up the paperwork in a jiffy.”

“I’m not particularly stressed, I’m fine.”

I reached a hand towards the food on the table.

“Ichirou.” My sister’s eyes were straightforward. “At least tell me who did you in. And their address.”

That was the look of someone about to unleash a secret technique. I shivered.

“No way... you’re scaring me...”

My sister shut her mouth, looking genuinely shocked.

“Ichirou, if it’s painful, talk to me anytime.”

“I will...”

The three of them kept a close watch of my conduct the whole time; I couldn’t really tell how the food tasted.

After a day of rest, the mindset that I was enjoying myself when everyone else was going to school started doing its work, increasing my stress when I did attend. Even more so after that ruckus. I entered the classroom all the while wondering what fate had in store for me.

“Good morning,” For some reason, Kobato-san came to greet me

first thing. With a cordial tone, “And good work on your break.”

“M-morning. It’s a break, I wasn’t doing any work...”

Perhaps the day before yesterday was doing its work, as there was no mad charge from the dream soldier battalion. In place of the regular event, even as she was taking notes out of the textbook, Kobato-san had both her table and chair turned in my direction at the ready. Usually, after greeting me, she’d aimlessly wander off somewhere.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing in particular.”

Why did she sound so formal? What was I supposed to do if this was some new way of bullying?

“Have you heard about Yamamoto-kun?”

“Suspension, right?”

“Yeah.”

What did Kobato-san think about one of the mainstays of her own group being suspended? If she actually detested me and in her sinless smile told me, “Satou-kun, you’re lower than a grasshopper~,” or something, the shock would hopper me right through the window glass. To ensure that didn’t happen, I started out with an apology.

“... I’m sorry. I’m reflecting.”

“Eh? Why? That was Yamamoto-kun’s fault. You’re not supposed to reflect.”

From the way she blinked at my apology, that didn’t seem to be a lie.

“No, there’s this and that politically. With the status difference and all. Highs and lows, they say. Like I’m acting impertinent for a mere Nobita-kun, or something. I can’t really phrase it, but I do think I didn’t act perfectly.”

With a hard-to-measure face, she slowly tilted her head around ten degrees.

“I’m the one who should be sorry. I knew I had to stop it, but I couldn’t take any action. I’m sorry”

“Nah, I think you’re better off like that. It’s quite often that forcing

your way in just makes things worse, and you might just become the new target. At times like those, you're probably better off watching along, and lending a helping hand later on."

"R-really? But just watching makes me uneasy with guilt."

"Stick up for someone there, and the grudges don't go away. But just knowing you have an ally in a group you thought was nothing but enemies makes it possible to endure."

"I see."

"I happen to be an expert on the subject."

Kobato-san made a face as if she had just had an epiphany. Crap. I ended up speaking heatedly about my bullying problem. I've got to take care.

"... Satou-kun, are you some bigshot in a special organization?"

I did a double take.

"Huh? Why?"

"You're popular, and you take hits like it's nothing."

"Popular? Eh? Pardon? Me? Where? With who? What fictional community?"

"Around half of the class is head over heels for you."

by the time she said half, I already got the punchline.

"... Before being human, they are soldiers first and foremost and must be excluded from the count."

"Ah, everyone in our class does love playing around, don't they~."

That statement made me wonder if she was actually an extremely strange person.

"I think this goes beyond play pretend, and there are some people you just find a little hard to get along with, right? I'm sure that's the case with your group's Yamamoto too. "

"Yamamoto-kun's stock's plummeted~."

That was the first time I ever heard Kobato-san badmouth someone. While I felt conflicted, I was deeply moved by the fact she was indeed human just like me. The sort of pleasure of teaching bad things to a pure, innocent soul.

With that sequence of events, I was once again seeing a change in my surrounding circumstance. Unlike the dramatic shift when my debut failed, this was an inconspicuous yet definitive change. To start with, Takahashi and Ooshima were blatantly avoiding me. Even if we never really talked to begin with, now it was complete zero, full ignore.

To put it in simple terms, this was shunning, rejecting, ostracization. If our class hadn't been filled with soldiers, it was likely that their conduct would serve as a trigger for a great many to follow suit. That being the case, we still consisted of half normal people, and while hesitant, they did abide by Takahashi's policy. In short, half the class had turned the other way. Oh, if it's just ignoring, that's nothing. Whichever the case, back when I was trying to force human interaction, I was essentially alone anyways. But within all of that, there stood at the pinnacle a strong warrior who would fail to read the mood and talk to me regardless. It was Kobato-san.

She struck up conversation so often I had to wonder If something was up. By that flow, I had more opportunities to talk to the handsome Itou who sat directly next to me. He always gave off a docile impression among the nobles, but once I'd talked to him, I found he was quite a good-natured fellow. Just a normal high school student who liked video games and manga. The two of them weren't influenced by Ooshima or Takahashi's compulsion. But If I relied on them too much, then it would be their positions that took the fall net, so I took precautions on my end to not converse for prolonged periods. How do you like that, this tact? Isn't it extraordinary? My nen isn't Air Reader for nothing.

Now then, about the warriors.

Looking at the result, I protected them and bore the full brunt of the assault (apparently).

Akashic Kinoshita started calling me SP, while Hero Andou called me The Director. Only Zeus Suzuki continued calling me Hewley. Even if they changed what they referred to me as, it was nothing more than a qualitative change in annoyance.

Moved by how she'd been saved, Oda started acting like she was Ryouko's underling. The incident's influence could be seen from how she had changed her black eyepatch to a white medical one. Her wooden sword was taken into school custody and in its place, she equipped an arm guard she said was to block sword (that thing the female ninjas in manga often wear). Perhaps parting from her sword had lowered her warrior spirit, as she added homosexual onto her character page. The target was Ryouko.

When she called her, "My Lord," I couldn't contain the chills. She was thankful to me too, for what it's worth, but after I mocked her with, "Your character's a mess, your character's a mess," she was back to detesting me. As long as the person she was actually following around didn't pay it any mind, my personal take was that she could do whatever she wanted.

"Ichirou, search."

Ryouko alone was unchanged. Dragging me all over the place, aimlessly searching for the dragon terminal day after day. In days of wasted effort and punishment, I was on the verge of forgetting my shame. I stopped feeling anything when people pointed at us. At this rate, I feared I'd stop picking up auras as well. Satou Ichirou fervently requests Mr. Fate to bring a swift resolution to this situation.

The result of that preamble was that today's lunch group consisted of Mens' Satou, Ladies' Satou, Kobato, Itou and Oda, the five of us. It started with Kobato-san's proposition, "Tomorrow lunch, we should deepen our bonds as seat neighbors. Let's eat together."

The five of us pushed desks together in the classroom.

"... I'm fine with that. But what about you?"

"Something wrong?" asked Kobato-san.

"Didn't you always eat with Ooshima?"

Ooshima was pecking at her lunch, her table pushed against Gal Imawano's, but now and again, she would send annoyed glances our way. How scary. I was fine, I had nothing left to lose, but I worried for Kobato-san.

"Yeah, we eat together a lot. But I'll eat here today."

“You too, Itou, you sure you don’t have to eat with Takahashi? Since Yamamoto’s not here, isn’t he alone?”

“He invited me, but I turned him down.”

These people were valuable airheads. Someone brimming with good will, look after them with are.

“Oda-san, why don’t you bring your desk over too? It’s a little narrow with four.”

“... I’m fine with this.”

Oda brought over only her chair, nestling herself close next to Ryouko. The only ones she could properly hold conversations with were variants off dream soldiers.

“Wow, Satou-kun, your lunch is amazing.”

“Embarrassing, you mean.”

When I asked for a boxed lunch, my mother put in time and effort. The concept was, “A lunch that won’t get me mocked at school,” with the implication being, “A lunch that won’t drag down my school life”. As bento boxes were heavy to lug around, I usually carried bread or ate at the cafeteria. I mean, how could you expect me to polish off a three-level-stacked lunch?

“Satou-san, where’s your meal?”

Ryouko silently pulled multiple Weider Vitamin jelly drinks from the inside of her robe and stacked them on the table. I see, that future-food-esque article really did seem to align with her tastes.

“T-that’s your lunch?” Itou immediately pulled back. When even Oda carried a proper meal with her, this girl alone went her own path.

“To eat is to replenish one’s energy reserves, a single step in the process of maintaining a carbon-based activity body. Therefore, ingestion is most efficiently done in paste form, in fact, in the Terminal Zone, energy replenishment is—”

“Okay, okay, okay, okay! Let’s eat!”

With so many guests, I couldn’t let her express her cringy setting.

“Then do you want to eat part of mine? Take whatever you like?”

Kobato-san held her small elliptical bento box across the table.

Ryouko stared fixedly at its contents.

“.....”

“.....”

A momentary silent confrontation. Between the two of them, the tensions of the last shootout scene in Kurosawa's film Sanjuro lingered. Eventually, Ryouko's face closed in on the box. Her moth directly pilfered a small hamburger steak. Ryouko swallowed it without chewing.

“... Was it good?”

“As the researcher's biological upgrade has removed any unnecessary processing allocated to the sense of taste, it is impossible to detect flavor.”

“You just made that up on the spot, didn't you? That one's definitely going to come back and bite you later.”

“.....”

Yeah, ignore me. Ignore me all you want.

“You got something nice, so how about thanking her? Maybe give her one of your jellies?”

“The Researcher will succumb to nutritional deficiency.”

“Then I'll give you the top layer of my bento. You can thank her now, can't you?”

It's not like I could eat three levels anyways. I gave the first one to Ryouko. With how excessive it was, just one layer was plenty to fill a single girl's worth of stomach.

“.....”

Ryouko offhandedly chucked a pack of Weider at Kobato-san. I was naïve.

“Hey! Why do you always have to be like that!”

“It's fine, it's fine. Satou-kun, don't worry about it. Thank you, Satou-san. I'll happily take it.”

“I always thought you were something, but you really are an amazing person, Satou-san.”

“I'm sorry...”

Feeling ashamed was always my role.

“Satou-kun, you're like Satou-san's mother.”

I'd thought something similar before. I'm sure my smile was stiff.

“But with Satou-kun and Satou-san, it's hard to understand, so can

I call you Ryouko-chan?”

“Go ahead,” I permitted it in her place.

Ryouko still ignored almost everyone apart from me.

“Then since we’re at it, Satou-kun, could you tell me your first name?”

“Ah, that’s a good idea~.”

“Eh? The first name of someone as worthless as myself?”

“Y-you’re not worthless... and Mens and Ladies make you sound like restrooms. No good?”

“Nah, it’s fine. The name’s Ichirou.”

“Oh, Ichirou in the outfield. Ten billion yen a year.”

“Hahahah... I do apologize that trash like me has the same name as a national hero.”

“I-I’m telling you, that’s not it... anyways, I’ll call you Ichirou-kun.”

“Then me too.”

What’s with this young and lustrous, fun daily conversation brimming with hope? Do things really change this much just by having two decent human beings around? And for Kobato-san to actually say my first name... I can stick my head up with pride.

“... Lewd fiend,” Oda quietly cursed me.

“Oy, I heard that, Oda.”

“Ah, but if you don’t want me to, that’s fine.”

I’m perfectly fine with it. No problem at all. It’s wonderful.

“So it’s wonderful,” Itou lightly laughed. “Satou-san, did you have any nicknames from middle school or something?”

Naturally, Ryouko didn’t speak, so I interpreted.

“Hey, or, You, don’t you think an interjection is good enough?”

“Hey, that’s a bit much,” Itou’s shoulders were shaking.

“Hmph, and Lecher is good enough for you, Ichirou.”

“Oda, get out back. A duel it is.”

Whether or not she was even listening to our conversation, Ryouko alone ill-temperedly devoured my lunch. Awkwardly using chopsticks.

After that, I often got to eating lunch with Kobato-san and Itou. We ended up forming a group.

Yamamoto's return didn't change that, and the class nobles were reduced to four. I had always felt a wall between me and people like Takahashi and Ooshima, but now it almost didn't matter at all. In times of peace, people lose their sense of crisis. And they receive their recompense.

The aberration started from something trivial. That's always how it happened.

Even TV specials that promote healthy lifestyles and sickness prevention every week emphasize, "His tragedy started because he ignored the small danger signals his body was sending him" on repeat.

It may have been fine if I kept a close observation of the class, but in the days where the tabs for the soldiers' eccentricities were sent my way without fail, I wasn't given the time to spectate.

So I was late to notice.

Change number one.

The onset of a phenomenon where the items I surely put in my desk drawer when I got to school were gone.

"Ryouko, let me see your textbook."

Waiting for her response to every little thing was a pain, so after I'd said that short sentence, I immediately pushed my desk up to her's. With the spine resting in the rift between stations, the textbook was folded open.

"To misplace your equipment is a disgrace for a soldier."

"It's not equipment, I'm not a soldier."

I noticed some traces of actual study in Ryouko's book. Postits, highlighter lines, notes in the margins... from her textbook alone, I might even get an illusion she was an honor student.

"So you are studying."

"Growing familiar with this world is beneficial to the mission."

"That so," it was a bit of a shock.

"Did you forget it at your residence?"

"I don't know. I don't remember forgetting it."

Change number two.

In PE, we'd been playing basketball for a while now.

Not in matches, we were practicing the basics all over the court.

Once, there was a time where a ball was thrown at my back. At first, I thought it was a coincidence, but in that class alone, the same thing happened thrice. There were no apologies, in the first place, it was uncertain who threw it. But in the direction it came from, Takahashi, Yamamoto, Kawai, Kobayashi or Saitou, one of them would always be around.

Change number three.

No matter how adverse I may be, I would always be apprehended and tortured out to town once a week. Dejected as I was, I changed my shoes and went outside, but Ryouko who would always take the initiative to leap at me was having a staring contest with her shoe cubby. She showed no signs of coming out.

"Heey, let's hurry and get this over with."

When I returned to take a peek, Ryouko's high-quality cosplay shoes were gone. I checked her feet to find she was still in her indoor shoes.

"What happened to your shoes?"

"Unknown."

"Were you wearing them when you got here this morning?"

"Affirmative."

In school, Ryouko was at least obligated to wear indoor shoes.

"... Do you think they've been stolen?"

"While it is impossible to determine, it seems appropriate to consider a theft has occurred."

"Rather, this is totally theft."

Three small changes in sequence had become a conviction.

I had a vague sense, but when it became so blatant it seems they had no further intent to hide it.

Ryouko didn't move.

"... Don't worry about it. You're not alone. You're alright."

Right, we were the combo leading the largest group in class. For argument's sake. Ryouko turned only her head.

“The Researcher has undergone special training and adjustments to accomplish her mission alone.”

“I know. But you don’t have to force yourself.”

“Force... even when conducting action under a highly cumbersome environment—”

I got it, I got it, I turned both hands to stop her.

“Now listen close, I’ll teach you something. You should carry your shoes with you. All the way to the classroom. Leaving your belongings in your clubroom locker and checking up on it every break time is best, but you’re not in any club. Do you want to try joining student council? If you say you’re an otaku, they might sympathize with you. Guess that’s not happening... can’t see you being elected... no, but if it’s general affairs, you can get in without elections but... no good... you’ll fail the interview.”

Whenever something was dragging Ryouko’s feet, it was always Ryouko herself.

“Hmmm,”

“Ichirou, it is no issue.”

She said without her usual attitude crumbling. But this time alone, on the contrary, it came off as unnatural. Even Ryouko had to be hiding how she really felt in the depths of her heart.

“Well, if you ever feel troubled, come and discuss it with me,” immediately realizing I was being too kind, I added on, “It’s better than holding it all in and bringing about some serious trouble.”

“.....”

“W-what is it?”

“There is something that must be discussed at once.”

“Oh, so there is. Go ahead.”

“The Researcher requires a ritual catalyst. Requesting that Ichirou offers it.”

“What, so even now, you’re going to show off your setting? As long as you’re fine with that.” While I was let down, even for someone like her, I felt bad that her shoes were taken. For now, I’d do whatever I could for her. “So what do you need?”

“Lower body hair.”

“I’ll be doing my best to kill you in some way that doesn’t involve violence.”

That was the first time in my life I ever mouthed genuine murderous intent.

“That murder declaration has been recorded by the Plenipotentiary Power Holder. It will serve as material evidence.”

She held out her medallion like a badge.

“That’s just a toy, ain’t it!? It doesn’t have any recording features!”

‘I’ll be doing my best to kill you, you, you (echo).’

“You really rock at impersonations, seriously!”

This girl had a high aptitude for crime.

“And yet, it is an ancient and noble catalyst.”

“I hate such low brow dirty humor!”

“... Understood. The catalyst may be obtained at a later date.”

“Not on my life.”

When a girl dumped a dirty joke on me, I kinda felt like I’d lost.

“So, real talk here, what are you going to do? Want me to buy some random pair? At the hundred-yen shop, I’m pretty sure they have shoes for three hundred...”

“Unnecessary.”

Ryouko stuffed her inside shoes into the cubby, and in her strange stocking-like undergarments (practically barefoot), she was about to go out.

“Stop right there. It hurts to watch. To put it in your terms, if you want to take psychological influence into account, the use of footwear is indispensable.”

“It has been perceived that Ichirou is beginning to develop the correct train of thought. As an activity body affiliated with the Central Assembly, The Researcher graciously approves your acquisition of a brown belt.”

“It’s on a belt system? There’s something off with that one.”

“.....”

“Tsk! Tsk!”

Really, only when she ignored me did she get really irritating. I was even trying to sympathize with her there.

“Anyway, I’ll at least get you some shoes. When you’re being bullied, the tried and true method is to come to school in cheap shoes. There’s nothing to be lost in getting a few pairs together, spares included. How much money do you have?”

“In dollars?”

“... Yen. Don’t play dumb.”

“In yen, about this much.

Ryouko produced an otherworldly-looking wallet from her breast pocket.

“That looks like a remote.”

“It is a remote.”

It was a remote.

Once she’d operated that, a portion of her mechanical staff popped open, making me jump back a bit.

“... T-that took me by surprise.”

I was a coward so I really wanted her to cut me some slack.

“This is the amount of money currently possessed.”

I peered into the open space. My eyes jumped out of their sockets. Going off-hand, a few hundred thousand.

“How defenseless can you...!”

“The small change is here.”

That old coin case was still embedded in the same place as usual.

“Don’t carry that much money with you! You’ll get robbed!”

“It is possible to cover various things with money,”

“Don’t put it like that. With that much, I can buy you dozens of shoes. Give me a thousand yen, I’ll get something.”

“The Researcher will accompany.”

“Why?”

“Conduct search on store interior.”

“Nope, no, definitely not. You’ll dirty your feet. I don’t want to have to see that.”

Honestly, I didn’t want to show up with Ryouko at the hundred yen shop I frequented. The DIY store, Daiso and the Hundred yen Shop were the greatest healing spots to me. I loved reasonably priced items so much I didn’t know what to do with myself. More than

anything, that have-everything aura was irresistible.

Ryouko jumped at me from behind. Wrapping her arms around my neck, and her legs around my hips. She was embracing me. And yet, there wasn't a hint of sexiness to it. It didn't make me happy in the slightest.

"Dwaaaaah!"

"They will not get dirty like this."

"You want me to walk like this!?" While the hundred-yen shop was in walking distance, Ryouko wasn't light enough to carry and move... huh? She was.

"I'm getting this terrible sense you're bound to die early."

"The matter is of no concern. The Researcher has conquered the fear of death."

"Liar."

I already had a painful reputation in school. How about I put one foot forward and shame myself more? I started off with her on my back.

"By the way, I do have my guesses as to who the culprit is, but are you interested?"

"By the Researcher's observations, there is a high probability that the culprit is a member of the Takahashi, Yamato, Itou, Ooshima, Imawano, Kobato group."

"Hmm, so you're actually aware of that. I thought you didn't discriminate between the people around you. But it can't be Itou or Kobato-san, right? They've been eating with us lately."

"Both possibilities should be taken into consideration. If you are to neglect due diligence and lower your own operating capabilities, even as a possessor of the mystic eyes, your continued existence may hang in the balance."

"But Kobato-san ain't happening, that one's impossible."

Associating Kobato-san's luxuriant smile with the words, "Satou-kun's things are my things so I can throw them away however I want~" was harsh.

"The way I see it, it's either Ooshima or Takahashi."

"The Researcher also thinks that identification is appropriate."

“Maybe my textbook went the same way. Well, as with the shoes, it’s probably not coming back.”

“Precisely, they will not return.”

Ryouko pulled out her remote, turned it to the school building and fiddled with it.

“For a self-destruct signal has just been dispatched to maintain confidentiality.”

“Pull the other one,” I laughed.

Right after, from somewhere, the babababang of presumably firecrackers went off, overlapping with the shrill shriek of a woman.

“..... For real?”

“Indeed.”

So even her shoes were rigged.

What’s more, that scream was very Ooshima. Perhaps she was right about to dispose of the shoes she’d taken.

“I’m starting to pity Ooshima. Hey, do you...”

“..... Sss.”

She raised a sleeper’s breath from my back.

“Fast, You fall asleep too fast.”

To have an instantaneous suspend, she really was a robot-like character. The delusional little girl on my back, her breathing alone was appropriate of a girl her age.

Her breath fluctuated. The softness I could feel across our thin inner garments generated improper thought across my cranial nerves. But if so, then so what?

I’m sure someone somewhere said this, but high school boys are the stupidest lifeform on the planet. Naturally, I wouldn’t be moved to affection. Someone who fell asleep when I carried them out of sheer goodwill was just as guilty as someone who falls asleep in a movie theater. The moment I was about to drop her, as was my natural right, she was already letting off delta waves, whispering this in her sleep.

“Mn..... ichi... rou.....”

She didn’t use that manufactured tone, that machine-like intonation she was always forcing. The syllables spilled out one by

one in a pathetic, chipped call. A compassionate inflection, the sweet murmur of my first name. I wanted to believe it was some mistake.

My surprise stretched out.

When I was just called normally, to think such soft emotions would encroach on my chest. To think I'd receive a stronger impact than when Kobato-san called me...

More than anything, to think a hole would open so easily in such a solid wall of delusion—

“... You're way too defenseless... good grief.”

The small-scale harassment continued for both me and Ryouko. Items lost, balls thrown, blatant laughs, bad rumors. They were all part of a path I had tread before, there was nothing novel about them. I didn't find it particularly disconcerting, and Ryouko was calm to no end.

I did manage to convince her to leave her savings at home, and now that her body was solidified with cheap goods, a little loss wouldn't amount to anything.

It happened on a certain day that I got to school on the early side, to find Akashic Kinoshita erasing some obscene doodles on the blackboard. While it immediately hit me who the doodles were directed at, more importantly, it was Kinoshita's conduct that surprised me.

“Hey, you don't have to do that. You'll get dragged in.”

“What are you saying, Satou!? You're the one protecting our life every day, this isn't even enough to return the favor.”

“I'm not protecting anything. Not in the slightest, you hear.

“And as one who will one day rule over the world, we cannot overlook any injustice.”

“... I see.”

While I appreciated his kindness, I couldn't honestly rejoice over it. Doodles on the blackboard meant that the attacks had received an upgrade. It would no longer be covert, it would be laid bare for all to

see. Unsatisfied with personal attacks and minor violent contact that showed not the slightest effect, the offending group had come to a resolute decision.

Foreseeing further intensification, I wanted to deal with the problem beforehand, but it wasn't as if I was a pro at bully countermeasures. I was just a pro at getting bullied.

All that came to mind was relying on Dorisen.

I doubted it would get too terrible. Perhaps I was underestimating it. As I folded my arms and did nothing, the net of malice was gradually closing in on us.

It was the next day that magic marker had turned Ryouko's desk into Hoichi the Earless.

"This is terrible."

As dull to ill-intent as she was, that was the first time I ever saw Kobato-san show her anger. That was just how terrible the scribbling was.

Ryouko gazed absentmindedly at her desk with no reaction. I thought it was just her normal attitude, but something was a little off.

"Are you feeling alright? Want to trade desks? It'll just be temporary."

"..... No issue. Carry on....."

Her attitude vaguely different from usual gave me a chill. Even I didn't know where her human boundary line was drawn. Ryouko wouldn't show me her weakness in the right stages to judge.

"It is an issue. We have to bring this to a class committee."

"... Yeah, I don't know about that."

There's no greater loss of dignity one can experience than the moment their bullying becomes a topic for everyone to discuss. In the first place, it would only resolve the matter through spur-of-the-moment means.

"Ichirou-kun, that's cold. When they're being so terrible,"

The fact Ryouko was a woman gave way to quite a few sexual lines.

Rather, that was the majority of them. There were quite a few gruesome bits of text mixed in. I could tell by instinct the culprit was female. How should I put it, this was a woman's malice.

"... This is unforgivable."

Kobato-san wiped her tears. The perpetrators were the Takahashi Group Kobato-san had close ties with. Though it seemed the two former nobles had yet to realize it. I wanted to avoid getting the two of them involved.

"For now, we should at least wipe it off."

When Itou made the proposal, I couldn't remain stationary.

"This one won't go away without paint thinner," my experience spoke.

"Paint thinner? Where can we find that? The art room?" Said Kobato-san.

"I can run to the DIY store and—"

"If you're fine with the modeling stuff, I've got some here."

The one who called over was the Yankee who sat to Itou's right, Yoshizawa. He tossed a bottle of lacquer thinner over to me.

"... I'm in your debt."

I knew Yoshizawa from P.E., where I'd been grouped with him from the start of the year.

From the bottom of my heart, I detested the P.E. Teacher's orders to "Pair up with whoever you want". That's got to be a teacher-sanctioned torture. On the first P.E. class of high school, as a countermeasure, I took the initiative to pair up with Yoshizawa (who everyone was keeping distance from). When it came to these types, I knew from experience you could have a relatively decent interaction if you dealt with them one-on-one. As time proved, that was true.

"Then I'll be borrowing this."

I had to get it done before too many people arrived. I pushed the desk up by the window, venting it as I roughly erased the scribbles. Without offering any help, Ryouko observed from right beside me with deep intrigue.

"Thinner stinks, but you have to put up with it."

“No problem.”

I gave Yoshizawa my thanks and returned the paint thinner. It was fresh to interact with him outside of P.E.; but what was he going to use the thinner for? Perhaps curious about the look I gave, Yoshizawa pulled around half of a plastic model box (a tank) out of his bag.

“What, you want to join the model club?”

“No, sorry for doubting you.”

So he was in the model club. That’s a surprise.

“Muh! This smell is... the lingering fragrance of Orgone Energy!

Don’t tell me, a monster?”

Upon entering the classroom, Hero Andou swiftly threw his body against the teacher’s desk. Let’s just leave him be. He was followed by Ozaki, and Ogino, and the other unfriendly girls who complained, “It smells. What’s this?” “I might get a headache” as they came in. This all started with that Ooshima gal you all worship, okay? I contained the urge to inform them and left them be.

“... It should be dry, let’s take a seat.”

“A seat shall be taken.”

“Are you a princess or something?”

The witch’s dignity crumbled the moment she sat in the chair.

Ryouko let out a short scream as her hips sprung up.

“What’s wrong!?”

“... Urgh,”

Groaning like a while beast, she stroked her own bottom and carefully plucked out a single thumbtack painted the same color as the chair’s wood.

“... Well now.”

That was in bad taste. The ill will had suddenly multiplied.

There hadn’t been any writing on the chair. In hindsight, that was quite an intentional oversight. The scribbles were bait. No, they were an attack while simultaneously serving as bait.

This wasn’t light harassment anymore. I could only think it was edging on serious bullying. Even yours truly who was more pitiful than anyone felt too irritated to write the tack off with a groan.

But I immediately hit the brakes.

A cynical voice in my head whispered, so Ryouko's being bullied, so what? Save her? When she doesn't intend to change in the slightest? The fact that Ryouko doesn't intend to wear a uniform, even if she does have Dorisen's permission is evidently rubbing a portion of the girls' nerves the wrong way. The one who needs to compromise is Ryouko, you don't even have to think about it. While these means of bullying are in bad taste, it was hard to say this was a just enough cause to defend to my last breath.

I looked at Ryouko.

Her large, spherical eyes were fixed motionlessly on me. I felt she was seeing through me all the way to my heart.

Her expression pleasantly cool as if it had been immortalized in a painting. She lacked the heat of emotions. Even now, I couldn't peek into what this cosplay witch was really thinking deep down. There were no two ways about it. From Ryouko to me, it was an unmeshing one-way street.

"... What are the damages?"

"Exceedingly light."

Perhaps Ryouko wanted to be protected by me.

Perhaps she was silently making her plea.

But had she forgotten? I was the sort of person who couldn't permit deviation. A weakling who feigned normal to protect himself. I wasn't a warrior. I couldn't fight. I ran, escaped and avoided. With all of my power, I finally managed to barely be able to manage that. I had no human power at all. For example, the fact Ozaki-san's attitude change didn't irritate me. I felt the same way. No one wanted to sit next to someone they found creepy.

That's why, while one side of me was enraged that the thumbtack had gone too far, it coexisted with a part that saw it as inevitable.

"What's wrong?"

Kobato-san and Itou returned with a wet rag.

I hesitated whether to tell them or not. Taking my eyes off of Ryouko, I had them escape to a point in space where they wouldn't have to collide with anyone. I hid the pin I'd received in the palm of

my hand.

“No, it’s nothing.”

That’s right, she’s an otherworldly witch whose mind doesn’t stop on the petty quarrels of mankind.

“Good morning. Please get in your seats.”

The mad existence in a pink cardigan, Dorisen arrived. The students chatting returned to their seats at once.

“Sit down.”

I directed the voice at no one in particular. Ryouko stroked the chair surface before quietly taking her seat.

For some reason, I was unable to ascertain her face. When I knew without looking, without anger or despair, it would be the same poker face as ever.

While classes quietly went on, it was around third period’s break time that Ryouko wandered away. Even a soldier among soldiers couldn’t lie to her biological phenomena. It was only at times like these that without dragging me along she would act on her own, making them easy to pick out.

That’s why I wasn’t wary in the slightest, and I wasn’t worried either.

She didn’t return after fourth period began.

“Ladies’ Satou! ... Hah, she’s still not here? Seriously, why can a student like that get by without any penalty? Hey, Mens, are you sure you don’t have to do your overseer duty today?”

That last part was close to cynicism.

“But we’ve got quite a few absences... Hm? Weren’t Ozaki, Enomoto, and Ogino here last period? Oy, where are they now?”

“The bathroom, I’d say.”

Ooshima answered without delay. A warning bell rang in a corner of my mind. If only it had grown duller. I cursed my only half-baked perception. Should I go, or should I stay? While the inner conflict couldn’t be canceled out by slight hesitation, I could at least go check on her. It was my job, I told myself.

“Sensei, my apologies, but my celiacgia is acting up, and I must bid you a good day!”

“What era are you from, kid?”

“And a good day to you too.”

I left the classroom.

“Hey, you,” I heard behind me as I walked straight towards the girls’ bathroom.

Along the way, I passed by three smiling girls on the way back. Their laughs came to a complete stop. The three with Ozaki at the lead glared at me with alien-like eyes. A nasty look.

Instead of returning the glare, I entered the boys’ room with an oblivious face. Without finishing my business, I waited for the three presences to vanish before reinfiltrating the girls’ bathroom. Even though I wasn’t witnessed, it was a nerve-wracking moment.

Unlike the boys’ lavatory, the girls’ side contained a sweet scent, and a faint presence.

Three stalls. The front two were empty. The back one had a mop wedged under the handle so it wouldn’t open. It was clearly to prevent exit from the inside.

I removed the rod and opened it to find a crumpled up blue blanked. Or so I thought, only to realize it was Ryouko, rolled in her robe, crouching over the toilet seat.

It seemed a garbage bin had been thrown in from above, covering her prided robe with trash. On top of that, they must have poured water over her as she was drenched.

A part around my stomach flipped inside out. It was a bad habit. Humans always want to become heroes of justice at the drop of a hat. But when it came to Ryouko, those standard senses of values are meaningless... and yet,

“Ryouko.”

The robe dangled limply as Ryouko peeked out her face. The usual expressionlessness. While she might have looked pale, it was surely my imagination.

“They finally went and did it.”

Come to think of it, wasn’t this the first time she received a direct

attack.

“They sealed you in and attacked with items from above. It’s a classic. That way, you can’t see the faces of whoever did you in.” That would solve the somewhat surprising detail of Ozaki’s group being the ones who carried it out. A noble’s influence really is amazing. If you didn’t include dream soldiers in the count, even in a divided class, they could move the smallest units to carry out bullying.

“I doubt you’d want to return to class when you’re that dirty.” Huddling her knees to her body over the toilet seat, she looked at me. As feeble as a little girl wrapped round and round in a blanket. “Do you want to cut class and go on a search or something? Personally, I’d be thankful if I could walk you home and get back.” Ryouko moved in a flash. She jumped into my chest. With enough force to push me back, she nuzzled her head into me. When she stuck to me, soaked to the skin, the moisture pierced all the way through my shirt. But more surprising than anything was the action of clinging to me in itself.

“Hey...”

Why are you getting hurt like a normal person?

Aren’t you supposed to make a prim face and say, “No problem detected”?

I couldn’t tell whether there were any tears mixed in with her soaked face or not. She simply pushed in her face and froze like that. Why was it decided that a soldier couldn’t feel pain? I knew better than anyone, even without tears or sobs, lament is something that, once established—

I tried taking her to the infirmary, but Ryouko wanted to get out of school. Leaving the campus was fine at all, but the air she gave off wasn’t one for a search, and despite my offer to walk her home, she wouldn’t tell me where she lived. She remained silent and hazy. There was only one place I knew where I could in any way manage a soaked person: my house.

“Hey, you can at least use a shower in your setting, right? You’d better properly do it yourself. I can’t look after you that far.”

A while after I shoved her into the washroom, I heard the sounds of water from the faucet, putting me at ease.

“I’ll give your clothes a quick water rinse and put them through the dryer.”

Retrieving the clothes that had been discarded over the bathmat, I stuffed them into the washing machine. In the midst, the terrifying fact that this girl didn’t wear undergarments came to light (though she did wear a leotard instead), but as my heart was already running at full capacity, so I managed to go without my mind stopping on it.

I put the washed on a quick timed rinse and shoved them into the dryer. It would take forty minutes minimum.

“There are a few towels around, if it’s not dry when you’re done, feel free to use them.”

After sending in only my voice, I left the dressing room.

“Now what.”

What should I do. What was I supposed to do? Flustered by the lack of things to do, I looked around restlessly. Perhaps I’m actually a small animal.

“... What are you doing?”

As I was lingering, I turned to find my older sister.

“Uwaaaah.”

“... Sorry.”

“I’m fine... no, I mean, why are you at the house at this hour? What about the salon?”

It was still before noon.

“... I’m on break, for lunch.”

I see, it’s a service industry, so they have their breaks staggered. I felt like ice water was injected through a tube pierced into my spine. Prominent fear is a form of cold. If my sister saw Ryouko, I’d be in a pinch. Would I? Quite probably.

“You’re going to eat out, right?”

“... I don’t have the sort of money, I want to eat at home.”

Right, my sister was an economist and a miser, she even commuted to her technical school four stations away by bike.

“Then you’re going to be finished eating in five minutes, right?”

“... There’s no way I would be. I was just about to start making it.”

Standing in front of the sink, she began prepping mushrooms. They were one of her favorites.

Standing with nothing to do, I set the kitchen table for two. The menu consisted of a mushroom-plentiful risotto, certainly a healthy meal.

“For you.”

“Ah, thanks.”

We ate mushrooms, the two of us.

“... Taste?”

“Ah, right. It tastes like mushroom.”

Truth be told, I couldn’t tell how it tasted. At that moment, a naked Ryouko was lurking in the house. If she was found, we were done for. It was dangerous if I didn’t take measures, yet I couldn’t find anything to do. Thirty minutes had passed since she started her shower. Was there any way to keep her hidden and take her out? After the meal, my sister made for the hallway. I immediately trailed behind.

“... What?”

“Ummm, are you going out?”

“Bathroom,” My sister entered the bathroom. I got there first.

“... You’re using the toilet? It’ll be embarrassing if you go right after me.”

“No, it’s not the toilet,”

With a serious face, my sister’s hand touched the sliding door of the dressing room.

“You’re taking a shower!?”

“... I am.” World-class bullying is harsh. My sister gave a mischievous laugh and added on. “Ichirou, wanna join me?”

While I got the feeling she said something considerably amazing, it didn’t seep into my brain.

My sister’s hand opened the door. A naked Ryouko was clung fast to

the round glass window of the rattling drying machine.
Her small bottom pointed towards me glistened excessively white.
My memory of the next ten minutes disappeared.

Ten minutes later, I was being interviewed in the living room. A heated interview at that. My sister's phone on the counter was flipped open on standby to contact my parents at any moment. She hadn't called yet. She was taking down the last fort.

"... So to put it all together," My sister's voice sounded like it was rumbling from the depths of the earth.

"That young lady is just a classmate, and you're looking after her on your homeroom teacher's orders?"

While I didn't have any memory of explaining, she was precisely right so I nodded.

"That's hard to believe. She was even using our shower."

"But it's true..."

"You sure you didn't skip school to get it on?"

Urp, that's a lively way to put it.

"You're wrong. Definitely not... I don't see her as a member of the opposite sex."

"And wait, what's up with that? What she's wearing?"

"It's cosplay... or rather... it's the you know what."

"That?"

"That..."

My sister looked up to the heavens. Her hand picked up the phone. I squeezed myself smaller.

"Ichirou, that's what does it for you? Are you still dragging it on?"

"You're wrong, I'm not dragging anything."

"But you did her. You must have some lingering affection."

"I didn't do anything!"

"Call her in."

"Fine..."

I went out to the hallway, and beckoned in Ryouko, who'd changed into her costume. I tried to swap out with her, but, "Ichirou, you

stay,” sis called me back. It became a joint interview.

“... Girl, look, what are you to my brother?”

“.....”

By the magic of invisibility, Ryouko was invisible to bystanders— in her head.

“Again. What’s with you. Picking a fight? I’ll smack you.”

The demon in my sister that had gotten her expelled from high school for violence was already awakening.

“.....”

“Lookin’ down me? Yeah, making fun of me, huh?”

I kept her down with both hands as she tried to stand.

“She’s sick, please cut her some slack.”

“Ichirou, I don’t want to say it, but betraying your family alone is the one thing I wouldn’t want to see you do.”

“Yes, we’ve already... I have the same feelings smoldering within me...”

“Just smoldering?”

“No, I... feel the same. I honest to goodness feel the same.”

“Now girl, I’ll let you off this time. But break up with Ichirou. Now get out.”

While she didn’t answer in words, Ryouko shifted her eyes to me.

“Umm...” While I was at a loss for words, she briskly made her way out. “Ah, wait.”

“Leave her be. If you want a girlfriend, I’ll introduce someone, so give up on that one. What are you going to do if you’re dragged in and bullied again?”

“Bullied?” I got just a little angry, “You sure you’re the person to say that?”

For a moment, my sister’s eyes wavered.

“Once I’ve cleaned up her case... I plan to properly recuperate. But that’s something I understand without anyone telling me.”

“... I just don’t want you to...”

Seeing sis’ face, I immediately couldn’t sit still.

“I’m chasing after her... it’s my job, for what it’s worth.”

Leaving my sister standing absentmindedly, I left the living room, yet she didn't try to stop me.

On the road in front of the gate, Ryouko leaned on her staff as a cane as she walked alone. I caught up in no time.

"... I'm sorry."

"Ichirou was not at fault."

From her short words, compared to the usual, her acting was just a little fainter.

"Was she family?"

"Yeah... my big sis..."

"Question, why speak formal?"

"Eh? Oh, you mean to my sister... yeah, it kinda just comes out like that."

It was hard to talk about my own circumstances, but I did feel guilty so my mouth was looser than usual.

"Back in middle school... I was bullied some... I made my family worry."

"....."

"My sister despised me, she would smack me around quite a bit.

And wait, it was like I was bullied even at home. Then one day, she smacked me in the ear and that was that... ever since then, I've been talking to her like this."

"Injured?"

I thought just a bit.

"My eardrum was punctured... though it's healed up fine. I was real scared back then. My ear couldn't hear anything, see. In the back of it, it was this stinging pain so harsh I didn't know what was going on around me. Eardrums can heal up, you know? Just like skin. But even after it healed, whenever I went out in front of my sis, I couldn't talk to her like I used to."

I don't really like bringing up injuries so I don't, but I was sure this girl didn't care too much.

She gripped my hand. Hers was frightfully cold. Taken by surprise,

I twitched all the way down to my heart.

“Then let us go.”

She lifted up my hand. Her fingers like silverwork glimmered as if there was a bracelet around my wrist.

“Go, go where?”

“The other side.”

A stillness descended. There was only one thing that fit the bill when Ryouko said the other side. The other world in her heart. To return there.

As her story went, she would return there after she gathered the dragon’s nails. What nonsense. It tired me out.

“Haha... you think I can go there too?”

“I can bring those who are the same as me. This world no longer has value. Let us go.”

That was probably the first time I heard her identify herself as ‘me’.

“If you find your nail... and it’s time for you to go... if...”

If you can’t return, then—

My feet naturally stopped. As if my vitality had drained away, my entire body felt sluggish. It was because I had no hope. If I had conviction I could go somewhere and that’s where the entrance would be, I could press forward forever. As long as I didn’t collide with the cold wall of reality. No, let’s just concede that colliding was just the start. It was whether or not there was even a gap above it to overcome. If that wall made it all the way to the ceiling, there wasn’t even any place to put in the effort.

Ryouko took a few steps forward and turned.

If as she wished, she found every dragon terminal... nothing would be resolved. I mean, it was nothing more than a good luck charm. Her destination was empty. What conclusion would I end up seeing off?

“Ichirou.”

I didn’t think my anguish would affect her, but she spoke up with strangely sharp timing.

“It seems you are not in your best condition today. Another time.”

“I see... see you then.”

With swift feet, she left down the other side of the road. Her lonesome back was pitifully small.

My desire to chase and help her, and my desire not to get involved in a story with no salvation were at odds with one another.

That's why I couldn't move a single step, or so I made an excuse to myself.

Despite the fact classes were going on, an eraser scrap passed in front of my eyes. From right to left. While I couldn't tell who did it at first, as the action was repeated, I eventually witnessed the scene of Ooshima taking the shot.

The target seemed to be Ryouko.

Ooshima's throwing boasted remarkable accuracy rate. Even if she missed, in the end, Ryouko's surroundings were filled with the same sort, so she could fire them without any restraint.

It would be easy if I could pretend not to say, but that wasn't quite the case.

I had an old eraser that was about to be used out in my pencil case, so I chucked it right at Ooshima. It looks like my Nobita-kun attributes were added on as it collided square with her head.

Just by having what she'd been doing done to her, she was already out looking for the culprit half-anxious, half-snapped. Since she was the queen bee, I thought she would devote herself to a strong front, but it is fragile human nature to fail to do so. The slightest accident may cause someone's fall or turn them into a demon. I'd witnessed it time and again.

Shortly thereafter, Ooshima looked directly at me. Her expression vanished.

We were in class, so she didn't particularly charge me, but I ended up nurturing the buds of hatred. A sigh.

"Satou, do you get what you've done?"

During break time, Ooshima approached with a frightfully threatening air. Her proud good looks dark red in anger, she was seriously scaring me. Where she was normally supposed to be

colder and more conniving, here and there, her pitch shot up, her tone sped up, she bit her tongue, she gave glimpses of the high level of murderous intent beyond the fence, which was scary after all.

"You're the one who started it," can't really blame someone for fighting back

"Shut it! It's got nothing to do with you!"

At her far-too-infantile phrasing, I got a bit bolder.

"It's got everything to do with me. The teacher ordered me to look after Ryouko, you know? If you do that where I can see, it's only natural that I do something about it. I'll be screwed if I let it slide. And wait, you know I can report this to the teacher, right? You wanna try suspension? Want to enjoy the sights of your own home?"

Ooshima's face froze up.

"... You're pissing me off."

"I'm the one who's pissed. If you're going to ignore me, do it to the end. Any more, and I'll definitely pay you back in kind."

Ooshima was shaking, she lightly kicked the foot of my desk. Just like that, with her silent glare, she squared up her shoulders and pranced out into the hall.

"... Good grief."

When I try my best living normally so I don't stand out, this is what I get. Not only did she have her eye on me, I ended up confronting her in a way to which there was no turning back. Aaah, what to do, what to do.

The target, Ryouko's hair was layered in small eraser scraps like dandruff.

"It's up to you whether or not you put up a resistance... but at least brush them off."

"...?"

"What are you supposed to be... a child?"

I used my hand to comb through her hair and remove the rubber. Some were being absorbed, so it took an unexpectedly long time. While engrossed in detailed work, I abruptly became aware of a dreg-like deposit of fatigue in my heart.

“I can’t guarantee I’ll be there to help you out forever.”

“.....”

“Ryouko?”

“... Something the matter?”

“Don’t space out.”

“At present, The Researcher is in lackluster condition...”

“Are you feeling bad?”

“Fatigue is accumulating. Therefore, today’s search must be put on hold.”

“Well, thanks for that. You can get used to it, but it’s still embarrassing.”

Just as she said, Ryouko seemed inexplicably down. I wondered if, like a body blow, the bullying was exhibiting its effect. No matter how different she was, bullying was a pressure that ate into the heart. Even if her delusions were too intense for her to realize it, the distortions were definitely accumulating.

“That’s the last of them.”

“... Ichirou.”

Ryouko said without looking at me.

“Mn?”

“... The Researcher offers her gratitude.”

“Thanks are all well and good, but how about some reflection or introspection or growth, that’s what I’m counting on.”

When I returned to my seat, Kobato-san talked to me in a pose like the Mother Mary in prayer.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen to Ryouko-chan?”

So she didn’t notice the eraser engagement? That was proof of just how earnestly she was listening to the lesson. There was no need to worry her.

“No, it’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Her hair was dirty, so I just told her to get a grip.”

Seriously, she needed to get a grip.

Evening, as I lay in my bed in the hours after dinner, a call came in from Shimizu.

‘Ichirou-kun, what happened after that? Smooth sailing?’

‘Ah, my bad. I didn’t report. I can’t call it smooth sailing, but it’s like I’ve settled down where I’ve found some peace.’

As thanks for his advice, I told him of all that had come to pass.

‘So without aiming for it, you took your place as commander of the delusion-armed forces. Sixteen is amazing. That’s got to be the largest group.’

‘You’re not wrong about that, but its not like they’re united. In the first place, I can’t stand to look at the cringe...’

Shimizu was guffawing over across the line.

‘You just can’t run away from karma, I guess.’

‘You hit it where it hurts. I’m about to lose my will to live here.’

From his point of view, it was at most someone else’s business, so half for fun, he calmly put out comments that would seriously drag me through the dumps.

‘Ah, more importantly, I’ve got something else to discuss,’ before I could groan, whether he sensed it or was a natural, Shimizu changed the subject. ‘Someone’s looking for you.’

“Hah?” I was bewildered by this information I had yet to say, hear, or think about.

‘It’s kinda like the network was suddenly on it. It seems there’s someone who wants to know about a Satou Ichirou from N High. That’s you, right? It’s circulating around the girls, you know.’

“Well who could... seriously, who?”

‘I don’t know the origin, but it came to my place from Mishima. Mishima Shouko, you remember her?’

“I’d like to forget her, if I could.”

Mishima was a classmate from middle school. Excluding Shimizu, there wasn’t a single person in middle school I could call a friend. Either enemy or potential enemy.

‘Relying on hearsay to pry into people is something only a person with a wide social circle can pull off. Do you know anyone like that near you?’

“... Social circle, a girl...”

There was only one person who fit the bill. The queen bee, Ooshima.

Though if you wanted to surprise me, maybe even Kobato. But if Kobato-san was the ringleader, and the motive was, “Satou-kun, your personal information is only good to threaten and oppress you, right~?” I might just kill myself. After immortalizing my despair against modern society on a message board or blog as my will and testament.

‘Well, they’re already looking into you, so there’s nothing you can do about it, but you’d better keep your guard up. Sounds nice, it’s like raw school politics at work. A little interesting.’

While Shimizu’s voice was bouncing oh so amusingly, my feelings were the reverse, falling lower and lower.

‘What, if it really gets too painful, you always have the option of EXPULSION~ Subtitle: The Flight to Freedom~. It’ll totally work out.’

“Even if you bring it up as a joke, expulsion’s a game over! No way!”

‘But you can play to your heart’s content.’

“I want to study!”

I snapped, half serious. “In the first place, I don’t even have any friends to play with!”

‘Hahahah. Well, just be careful. I went out of my way to leak this information.’

“What does leaking it accomplish?”

‘Think about that on your side. How about solidifying your defenses or something?’

He makes it sound easy. Even if you know it’s coming, not being able to avoid it is the essence of bullying and harassment. Shimizu’s grades and athletics weren’t up to snuff, but he knew his way around. From an advanced player’s point of view, my troubles must have been simply charming. Without any way to put his information to good use, it came to pass that the inevitable made a direct impact a few days later.

“... Satou, got a minute?”

Over break time, the representative of the normal girls, Ozaki-san called me out. I faltered somewhat with someone I thought I'd never have another conversation with talking to me. Granted, she seemed to be talking somewhat reluctantly.

That was the second time I visited the landing between the third floor, and the fourth-floor penthouse.

As the roof was sealed off, this place was a dead end. A place no one would come without a destination in mind, but the time Ozaki-san led me, that's where Ooshima was.

What a peculiar lineup, I felt at first.

That was because, as of late, Ooshima was often paired up with Imawano, showing no signs of acting in a larger group. Yet now, the queen bee with her back against the wall was with Enomoto, Ogino, and Kano (Four people, including Ozaki). Apart from Ooshima, they were all normal girls.

My half-dead intuition immediately worked out that rather than the “Close to equal existence and too free-spirited to anticipate” Imawano, she had chosen the group that “Respected the heck out of her and were easy to use”.

While being called out by the queen was a bit of an enthralling experience, a dark feeling swiftly filled my body to the brim.

The triumphant face Ooshima carried from the very beginning was a source of anxiety.

I was about to run for the hills, but unless this conversation would be forceful enough to lead to Plan EXPULSION, I knew that wouldn't resolve anything. A hopeless do or die.

Ooshima's hand carried a cell-phone left open like a deceased shellfish. Crap, I inferred. This isn't going to go well. It was rare for a mere object to emit an aura of its own.

“Satou, I'm sure you have no idea why I called you here.”

“How could I?”

Extreme mental strain brought a rush to my words. Perhaps my intonation had been interesting, as it warranted some giggles from the girls.

"I'm not here to complain to you, you can be sure about that."

Ooshima said in a strangely gentle voice. Oh, I see, I could breathe a sigh of... despair, my degree of wariness only spiked in strength.

"But you think they're creepy, don't you?"

"Pardon?"

"The crazy folks in our class. You know who I'm talking about."

"... That's why you quarantined them all in one place during seat changes, right?"

"I mean, they're impossible to hold a conversation with. Not only are they unpleasant, they're impossible to deal with. It's not even a difference of opinion, it's not like our side did anything wrong. The other side's just off in la-la land."

In essence, I shared her opinion, so I couldn't say anything clever back. I almost found myself nodding, "my thoughts exactly".

Whether she had seen through my intentions or not, Ooshima continued on.

"But you're different, Mens. As far as I've seen you've got a proper brain."

"Well, I sure hope so. That's why, if you bully me, you should expect some proper countermeasures. You're barking up the wrong tree here, could you find a better use of your time?"

Oh perish the thought, Ooshima shook her hand.

"The thing is, there's something I wanted that supposedly-decent Satou to see."

She turned her cellphone towards me. The scent of death lingered around that dead-clam-like husk. It was at that moment that my impulse to run reached its max. Something severe was about to happen.

The crystal display depicted a photo.

I let out a scream words failed to describe.

She immediately closed the phone.

"Did you see? Did you understand?"

"... That...!"

"I asked a friend to search out someone who went to the same middle school," Shimizu's warning echoed coinciding with a

hallucination of the ground below me collapsing.

“And I heard it aaaall. Once I knew, I searched for a good girl who had the right picture. Amazing, right? This?”

I couldn’t move at all. The shock that had struck my heart was far too great even my body was shot. For how much I had always feared this moment. For all the scrupulous caution I had paid. For how deeply I understood how much dust would fly if they struck me. I was finally outed.

The carelessness, the bad luck, the malice, no matter how many curses flew, it wouldn’t be enough.

“If this gets out, I’m sure there are some people around you who would leave.” She wasn’t just looking down on me; those were the eyes of a tyrant with my continued existence on the palm of her hand. “Like Kobato.”

I was startled. I’d been seen through. I hadn’t interacted with her enough to assert with confidence that would never be the case.

Rather, I didn’t want to know in the first place. Didn’t want to try considering it.

Ooshima casually circled behind me, lowering the tone of her voice. It was a whisper of the devil.

“... Don’t get in the way of what I do. You got that?”

The conditions she lay rung lighter than anticipated. I didn’t really have any interest in Ooshima to begin with.

“... I couldn’t care less what you do, as long as it doesn’t involve Ryouko...”

“Are you an idiot?” The destructive force of a blunt weapon returned to her voice. “I’m telling you not to follow through for her in any way, shape or form.

“Ah...”

“In the first place, quit it with the double-Satou. Don’t cover for her. Go to the teacher, and get dismissed from your position.”

“There’s no way I’d comply.”

“Then I’ll just spread this?”

What if I stole her cellular phone and smashed it?

Of course, that was a no-go. She could just buy a new one, and she

could reclaim the data from that friend of hers however many times she wanted. I'm sure someone in her friend group had it saved on a computer.

"Let's see. Stop hanging around with her. Get in a fight or something, and go your separate ways."

"Do you... really hate Ryouko that much....."

"It is only natural for Satou Ryouko to be done in."

Ooshima's voice came with the snap of a whip.

"It's stranger for someone to cover for her. That cosplay... it's crazy her private clothes are permitted. She's the only one allowed to break a rule everyone has to oblige. It's unfair, and you know as well as I do that no one accepts it. Outside of that loony bin of yours. Are you telling me I won't be punished if I took out a cigarette and smoked it? You think that'd happen? You screwin' with me?"

I'd made several suggestions to Ryouko about her uniform as well. But never once did she lend an ear. As long as her appearance changed, no matter how cringy she was inside, I'd be able to tentatively play it off. But Ryouko would never give any ground on the most important part of all.

And her searching. I spent so much time with her and completely failed to sprout mutual understanding. We were unmeshing gears. Hey, what do you think about me, anyway? Do you ever feel like actually 'conversing' with me? I don't know how many times I felt like asking.

That's why, in the truest sense, I couldn't stand by her side. We had no common language.

"If you don't get in our way, I won't spread the pic. Your choice."

"....."

"You one of those guys who's fine with being shunned?"

"Not really."

"I'm not telling you to bully her. I'm just telling you to stay out."

I did a search of what was in my heart. Whether there was just enough cause to protect Ryouko, even if it meant my secret getting out... there wasn't. The search came up with zero results. Nothing of the sort existed, not even a fragment. I couldn't sympathize, I

couldn't concede, I couldn't fall back to ethics. Ryouko had done whatever she wanted, and she hadn't paid her dues. That was the injustice.

I had to pay them. I received the recompense of folly. Over the course of three years.

Wasn't Ryouko obligated to pay them once? At the moment that logic established itself, something was collapsing inside of me.

What had frozen solid by Dorisen's order dissolved, a sense of loss, and a sense of release, a sense of guilt and resignation surfaced.

That's why, Ooshima had the finest of timing.

"You got that, Koga-kun?"

The moment she emphasized that, "... Yeah," I pathetically replied. I even held a sense I had been saved.

"Ichirou, it is time to search."

The same day, after school. Ryouko stood by my desk.

I couldn't look her properly in the face anymore.

Stuffing a textbook into my bag, I exerted myself to reply in a forcedly level voice.

"I can't. I've got business to attend to."

"... Significant breach of contract"

"It's not happening."

When my desk was empty, I continued changing the order of the books in the bag. I couldn't settle down with that positioning. It would be difficult to carry if I didn't get it right. Tacking on some false reason, I immersed myself in the act.

I wanted my cold attitude to rid me of her already.

But once she'd latched onto something, Ryouko wouldn't change her thoughts so easily. No one knew that better than me. My only option was to forcefully shake her off.

If I complied— as I raised my face, Ooshima entered my field of view. She was watching. Wicked women are generally moderately proficient. With a smile of ice on her face, her long legs folded, she sat elegantly with her back leaned against the wall. If say, Sharon

Stone's human power was 100Hu, Ooshima quite likely read in at 70. She was way too strong.

"But if the Dragon Terminals are not found and secured, the world will fall into an unprecedented crisis. Those articles are too dangerous for the phenomenal realm; the two of us must contain them no matter the cost."

"Sorry."

It was impossible to thrust her away with conversation. Standing from my seat, I could only leave by physical means.

Ryouko, left by the wayside, looked far too lonely for a witch who had slipped in alone from another world. What cowardly self-preservation. I knew full well I was pathetic. If you want to blame me for not sacrificing myself to save someone, be my guest. I didn't have the slightest expectations for that sort of justice in the world. There are only two things that can save you, coincidence or wisdom. At home, after a dinner I couldn't make out the flavor of, I made a call. It took three calls before someone picked up. A juvenile breath informed me Ryouko was across the line.

'.....'

"Ryouko? Sorry, but there's something I want to talk about. Can you listen?"

That Ryouko was being bullied. That I was being targeted. That if we didn't stop hanging out, I would be dragged in. I covered up only Ooshima's name and told her.

"You might hate me for it, but I'm prioritizing self-preservation. That's why in class and in school, I can't work together with you for the time being. Please try not to talk to me. Even if you do, I can't properly interact at school."

'... You promised to search.'

"I did. I won't go back on my word. However," urged on by guilt, I naturally sped up.

"We'll be acting separately."

'Define separately.'

"Exactly what it sounds like. I'll search by myself. You handle your side."

I had a faint sense she was hard of breath.

‘... Ichirou is being mean.’

“That’s right. But I’m not the only mean one here, you’re better off knowing that.”

Without crying sour grapes or making any excuse, I genuinely thought so. Ryouko was far too defenseless. Basking in her oddities was pretty much spreading the word, “You can attack me.”

“If you can’t endure it anymore,” and I gave her some advice. The greatest support I was capable of. “Throw away your costume and wear a uniform.”

‘... Ignoring the fact that proposition would lower defense values, The Researcher is hidden by a spell of concealment making it impossible for residents of the phenomenal realm to detect her by visual means. There is no necessity to wear—’

I felt like crying when I heard that unproductive explanation for the umpteenth time.

“Why are you like that?”

I yelled in a teary voice.

“Why can’t you even put in the minimum effort to protect yourself!? Is it that important to show off you’re different from normal? Give me a break already! I don’t want to deal with that anymore! It’s because I realized it was pathetic, because I became aware of it, that I can never go back there again!”

While the phone waves could give hints, they wouldn’t convert her true thoughts into signals for me. Even if I had to make my best guess, when it really came down to it, dream soldiers were childish attention whores.

While they wanted to bathe in that spectacular attention, they knew they weren’t special, so they tried to make themselves cool with the flip of a switch. For those with otaku tendencies, it was easy for their sense of values to tilt away from reality. They’d become fictional operatives or bandmembers or develop multiple personalities or special powers. Showing off those settings at every opportunity for all to see came because they wanted to be respected and praised. Ryouko was the same.

“... Do you hate normal so much? Is the thought of being a normal person that far beneath you? If you want to be noticed, then put in enough effort for people to want to look at you. Put in the time. Become something real. Don't skip over all the process and suddenly demand results. I detest that sorta thing. It's only natural you get bullied. Why can't you guys make me genuinely want to help you...”

If she was actually trying to help herself, I'd help out all I could. But for someone without any such intent, why? How? That would just be spoiling them.

'Ichirou's restraints are...' Ryouko was at a rare loss for words.

“What's this about restraints? Are you saying the problem is with me? That is the logic you always used, isn't it. No, this isn't even on the level of logic. You're just rejecting me.”

Alongside a dizziness, I was assailed by a mud-like fatigue. It became irksome even to put my stormy emotions to words. I put a lid over my heart.

“If I find a nail, I'll deliver it to you. Could you not talk to me at school? I don't really care if you hate me.”

I hung up without waiting for an answer. I immediately cut the power after that.

In the end, carrying a long battle to distance Ryouko with attitude alone was impossible for me. A coward in a corner. Evidenced by the fact the high stress was churning my stomach in circles.

When midterms were only two weeks away, a message came to my phone that rarely ever made a peep. The girl who taught me about the good luck charm.

She informed she found out the location of the dragon's nail—or perhaps the dragon terminal.

Alongside the girls who carried them, the nails passed from hiding place to hiding place, rarely disappearing from circulation.

The hiding place changed every time, and while they were grounded in certain rules, the location was decided by whoever hid it. Once

their problems were solved, if they didn't pass the baton to the next hand, there was a curse (so they say) and information wasn't so easy to gather.

But in such a well-kept system, there was just a single hole.

"Worn down nails are supposed to be offered up, but a lot of people don't know about that. There are a lot of kids worried when theirs is damaged or breaks, so the posts come around now and again."

The mail sent to me had a screenshot of a post attached.

A certain OP posed the question, "What do I do if the nail breaks?"

From the message body, it seemed considerably serious, and I could tell it was a real question not out of pure curiosity.

The response came in no time. "You just have to offer it to the shrine," it even identified the shrine's location. If the OP was serious, they would surely make for the shrine within the next day, she deduced.

So after school, I pedaled my bike and made for the shrine in question. Even if it was in the same town, I got considerably lost, barely managing to find it before the darkness set in.

"Heh.... This?"

I compared the shrine before me to the map on my phone. No doubt about it.

The shrine was terribly small. With the image of a standard temple in my head, I felt rather let down.

The grounds were only around four meters across. There was no main office building, with the lined Torii gates all puny ones. The front gate and hall of prayer were one and the same, with the two Japanese gargoyles no larger than cats. The easily countable trees in the grove around it surrounded the main sanctum like a folding screen.

"And you're supposed to hide it here."

In the foundation supporting the main shrine, there was a portion where the stone was put together in a lattice pattern, with a crevice opened up in a blind spot. When I timidly reached my hand in, my finger brushed up against the texture of a seal case.

“It’s really there...”

I pulled it out and investigated it: the same item I’d seen at the infirmary and soba shop was contained. It was undoubtedly real. If I handed it to Ryouko, I’d have fulfilled my duty for the time being. But what sort of wish did that girl have to collect all of these? Ever since that phone call, Ryouko had taken off from school. My secret hadn’t been publicized yet. But that didn’t mean the situation was one to be relieved about, and as long as my secrets were being held, my stress continued perpetually.

“... Crap, I’m in a dead end no matter what.”

I gazed at the nail, my conscious muddled with whatever unsatisfying conclusion I might reach.

“Hey you! Hold it right there!”

The abrupt call severed my thoughts.

The individual who called out to me wore clothes that didn’t fit the place that, while small, was still a shrine. I casual hunting cap, a three-quarter-sleeve T, skinny jeans. His refined impression came from the ornaments covering up his neck and wrists just drab enough not to come off as flashy. He looked like he’d fit in more playing around the business district than visiting a shrine, but more than that off-sense, the stronger sensation was one of *déjà vu*.

“Haven’t I seen you before?” “You run the accessory store, don’t you?”

Our voices overlapped in timing and intent.

“I see... so you’re also chasing the charms.”

“Yep.”

When a trace of night wind began to hang in the fall air, not a single child’s shadow graced the playground equipment of the park, where Kume-san and I occupied a bench meant for three. I meekly sipped at the canned coffee he treated me to as I explained my circumstance, covering up the deeper portions.

After he’d heard out my situation, Kume-san groaned a hmmmm, to himself as he thought.

“... While I’m sorry about your absent girlfriend, I’ll have to retrieve this one.”

The nail was in Kume-san’s hands. He had requested I hand over the one I’d obtained.

“Kume-san, how are you related to these charms?”

“Looks like I can’t keep silent after all you’ve told me...”

“Is it complicated?”

“No, it’s just, as a side job, I take care of maintaining these good luck charms.”

“Maintaining charms? That’s something you don’t hear about often.”

When Kume-san laughed, he seemed just a little younger.

“You’re right. Though it’s half just a hobby. A few years ago, I was on the internet when I stumbled upon a story that the nails were enshrined... when I tried looking into it, they really were here.”

“And maintenance?”

“That’s what I do. After that, I can give it to someone, or hide it somewhere and post about it on the net.”

That really is a trendy charm system. To think it even has a maintenance feature, what a mystery.

“Do you know who started all of this?”

“Couldn’t tell ya. But that’s how it goes with urban legends, don’t you think.”

“Hmm, then do you know how many nails there are in total?”

“I don’t know that either. I’m pretty sure there are more than ten. From time to time I see one at the shrine and know it’s one I’ve worked on before... but only occasionally.”

Then there was a long, long way to go to collect them all. Not that I knew how many Ryouko needed.

Kume-san took a glance at my wrist.

“I see you’re still wearing the watch I made.”

“Yep, I’ve taken a liking to it. My previous one was a nine-hundred-yen cheapo, it’s a nice upgrade.”

Kume-san’s looks crumbled. He was the honest sort who smiled when praised.

“Thank you. It makes me happy to see what I’ve made be put to actual use.”

“You’re quite the creator.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kume-san flapped his hand. He shied back.

“I’m not that great. At most, a guy who does some crafts.”

His reactions were so interesting I almost laughed myself.

“So not even a craftsman yet?”

“There’s a long way ahead of me. I’d like to try some large job someday.”

“I’m cheering you on.”

“Ah, right. Thanks,” Kume-san scratched his head.

“Then I should get going. I’ll try looking for another nail.”

Kume-san turned to a serious face. Rubbing his chin, he spent a while in deep thought.

“... I feel a bit sorry. You’re the one who acted on the info first, but you’re not getting any return.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure it’s in need of some maintenance. Those charms are interesting. You should keep them going.”

When I told him how I felt with no fabrication, Kume-san stared at my face.

“... Satou-kun, could you keep what I’m about to tell you a secret from the girls?”

“Sure?”

The story Kume-san told me in exchange for the nail brought me the sort of shocker I got from reading a special feature in ‘Mu’.

The place Kume-san directed me to was a region filled with apartment complexes a little ways away from the station. Away from the main road, where only futon shops, cleaning stores, Izakayas, stores appealing to the direct local crowd dotted the place. The lack of prosperity wasn’t much different from a residential district in the middle of the day. So when I stood before the indicated complex and spotted the antique bookstore occupying the first floor, I was confused in spite of being informed of it

beforehand.

How was an old bookstore surviving in a place like this—

One look was enough to tell the store was a clutter.

It was the sort of bookstore you might see in Kanda-Jinbocho, the sort wit books piled up the edges of the eves. The dustiness could be conveyed outside, and entering the shop required some courage.

By the way, to the right of it was a Ramen store with the shutters down, to the left, a western apparel store catering to old women (judging by the impression).

“So this is... the origin of the legend.”

The store’s interior was narrow. What’s more, because the bookshelves were huddled together to the very limit, it became even more cramped. So cramped, it would be impossible to slip passed another person between the shelves. On the floor, book bundles bound in vinyl threads, were mercilessly stacked up with too much empty space like a shoddily-played game of Tetris.

There was evidentially no intention to display products in any tidy manner. Neither was there any mind to maintain hygienics in the store. The paper taped to the glass of the entrance sliding door had nothing but ‘Shoplift!’ written on it in red, quite a perplexing statement. Usually, Don’t shoplift, or Shoplifters will be arrested was the norm. Meaning, this store was far from a normal store, and its shadiness was also fitting of the land that birthed a legend.

After venturing further and further into the narrow store buried in old books, “Whoa,” the sight of a beauty in a red kimono sitting behind a cramped fifty-centimeter-ish counter almost made me jump back.

The manuscript I was looking for—I recalled Kume-san’s words—was in the furthest reaches of the old bookstore, it was hidden in the read-only, not-for-sale corner.

Countless bookshelves had changed what was once an open space into a complicated maze. The back passage passed the counter had a placed with a single curtain draped over it. Whether I was allowed to pass beyond it or not... I looked at the shopkeeper, hesitating whether to ask or not, when the pretty lady raised her face, turned

me a modest smile and told me, “The adult section,” I immediately straightened my back, but shortly “... is not in that direction so please proceed at your leisure” she added on. If nothing else, I had a vague sense I was being teased. I was running into a lot of weirdos these days. Dammit.

After regrouping, I marched on.

It was blatantly the adult section.

“You lied to me!”

But at the end of the adult section was the not-for-sale corner I was looking for.

“Kuh...”

I hate this store.

The manuscript I was looking for—came Kume-san’s secretive whisper— is sandwiched in the pages of a local history book. It was a small corner. It didn’t take long to find.

Locally history was a topic that wouldn’t sell to a particularly wide demographic. I’d seen the same book stacked in small bookstores around the shopping district, they gave off the sense they hadn’t sold in ten years.

An antique local history was at an even greater disadvantage.

While the price printed on the back cover listed it as a faded one thousand yen, the tag identified it was not for sale. What could be bought for a discount at the shopping district. It was a mystery for what reason it was being kept.

That’s just how perfect the camouflage is— I recalled the look in Kume-san’s eyes, as if he was boasting of the treasure he’d found. I tried skimming. The sour scent of old paper stung the air. Perfectly in the center, a colorful scrap of paper was sandwiched with the vividness of a pressed flower. The manuscript.

“Well I’ll be...”

The mysterious work known as the Voynich Manuscript was famous, and it was something similar. The manuscript was covered up in what looked like ancient writing. While they looked vaguely Japanese, there wasn’t a single character there I had ever seen before. That foreign language with a touch of Japanese was almost

like a code.

There were a few colored illustrations, rendering the manuscript vibrant like a picture book. That's what gave it a playful impression. The illustrations were of maps, of vegetation, of rocks, of brambly landscapes, of mysterious animals. There was no uniformity to them, on the contrary giving it a broader meaning. While it looked like a natural history magazine to me, according to Kume-san, it was a 'Research document on spells,' apparently.

The manuscript had fallen apart. Each page was preserved in a different interval of the history book. What was originally a not-for-sale volume, with all sorts of curious onlookers passing by and flipping through (it was apparently a famous manuscript in the area), it was dismantled, however, unable to take it out, it was preserved like this. If it was sandwiched in an unneeded book, perhaps those hopefuls would look forward to a chance they might be able to secretly buy it off (at a discount no less).

"It's detailed, I'm surprised they got so much in by hand..."

It was apparently a complete unknown what hand had filled in the crowded codes and schema that covered it. This sort of thing couldn't have been completed without a hint of dementia.

As I was flipping through the manuscript in the pages of the history book, I came across a drawing perfectly resembling the dragon's nail.

"Here it is!"

There was no doubt whoever made the nail reproduced it from this. Some guy from the distant past. It hurt that I couldn't read the letters. If I showed this to Ryouko, would her delusions clear up? Or could it be, she'd make up something new? Whatever the case, it was a large discovery, so reporting to Ryouko was a necessity. I was better not using my phone in the store. I took eight minutes to tap out the text, 'Drgon info get, address _____ complex, thirst floor, love to brook store.' And send it. I didn't really what was happening after I hit space. When I looked back, for some reason, move had become love (seriously, why?).

The reply came in forty seconds.

'This is Researcher. Emergency Signal Received. Transferring to point in 10sec.'

Ten seconds?

"Arrived."

"Dwah."

Ryouko was standing right next to me. Her other world costume the same as ever.

"W-when did you get here?"

"One moment ago."

From the still-flapping curtain, even if the transfer part was a lie, that would mean she just happened to be somewhere nearby.

"Don't tell me... you were tailing me?"

"Negative. Teleport. The truth."

I let out a small cry. That was the face of a liar. She was tailing, stalking, a crime.

"Why were you tailing me!"

"Transfer is the only method to encounter Ichirou after school."

I was at a loss for words.

"Then why weren't you at school...?"

"Apart from speaking with Ichirou, it is impossible to discern any meaning in going, therefore school commute has been suspended."

"... Is that so."

"Report findings."

While there was a lot I wanted to say, I had to finish my business first.

"Have a look at this. It's not for sale, so you can't bring it out in excitement."

Ryouko took the book closely observing the page with the dragon terminal illustration. Her face with the glisten of silver plating was visibly pierced with the red of excitement.

"I-Ichirou. This discovery is exceedingly beneficial."

"I know, right? But you can't take it with you."

"... Will attempt negotiation."

"I doubt it'll get you anywhere. I'm sure countless people have tried before you."

To add to that, even if we took it, we wouldn't be able to decrypt it.

"....."

"This is the identity of the item you call the dragon terminal. That's all I wanted to tell you. I couldn't obtain a real article, but I think this is the best information I'm capable of offering."

That's why, this is the end.

"....."

Ryouko was already entranced in the manuscript. Like an old typewriter, I could follow her eyes moving left and right in a systematic manner. Her eyes scanned through the other pages as well. I called to her from my side.

"Then I'll be off, you can investigate until you're satisfied. I can't do anything about you coming to school, but just checking in for attendance is an option, so if you're not sick, you're better off attending. It's better than getting counseled... I'm washing my hands with it. I'll be protecting myself in the classroom, but I'll at least consult over the phone. If possible, I'd be happy if you wanted to discuss rehabilitation."

"....."

She wasn't listening after all.

Something was bogging me down. But the search ended here.

"Goodbye!"

"?"

While she turned for only a moment to my angered cry, her attention immediately returned to her hands. She wouldn't try to understand a single part of my irritation. As she stooped over, bringing her eyes right up to the book, she looked far younger than she really was.

My heart froze over. Drenching yourself in delusion is no different from putting up walls. A childish delusion was no different from garbage. It's not something you can blame anyone for. Nor is it something you can hoist up with pride.

I was made the leader of the oddball group, trying to live each day as it came, but she never even considered opening her heart to me. I don't care if I'm narrow-minded. I don't mind if you insult me, call

me cold. I just want to be a normal human being. I want to say good riddance to my past self.

I was only twelve when I enlisted.

I joined the dream legion.

While I wasn't the one to cast judgment, I think I was a first-rate soldier.

The symptoms began in a first year's head. It lasted close to three years.

Games, light novels, comics, I remember being hooked on them from around fifth grade. Up to then, it was the normal soccer, games, manga, TV. My parents wouldn't buy me many manga or games, they carefully restrained me from overdose, but for some reason, light novels alone slipped under my parents' radar. I'm sure it was because they were novels. If their fifth-grade son was hooked on reading, any parent would loosen the strings on their wallet. After junior novels, I'm sure they wanted me to shift into Natsume Souseki or Ishikawa Takuboku or Izumi Kyōka, but that never happened. With the support of an environment that would endlessly fuel my novel fever, like a flaming crop, it continued to burn and spread.

I was hooked on 'Mu' on the side. 'Mu' was a mystery magazine that supported a young man's dreams. With its claim to be an academic publication, I also got it through my parents' checks. Along with the Mu columnist, I prayed for the existence of the Mongolian deathworm.

I read, I festered, I yearned—

I read of warriors with settings that were far too cool.

Like freely manipulating katanas that were taller than they were, emitting all sorts of destructive energies, concealing special abilities, modern magic, various powers awakening in the midst of battle, wearing a coat right over bare skin.

It was inevitable that I longed for the day one would be reborn, slip into, escape to, lose their memory in, or charge recklessly onto the

stage of modern Japan.

Just like that, in the spring of my first year of middle school, the delusion of the strongest swordsman from another world was born.

Bearing a harsh past, he held the power to (I remember the exaltation I felt when I wrote the line) annihilate an entire army.

Both his sword arm and his magic were super first rate. He had a deep familial love for his sickly younger sister.

... I produced the settings in bulk. I put them together in notebooks.

Ten volumes in total. I wrote out chronologies, I determined enemies, I let my feelings rage on for a distant lover. I mulled over a little sister's forbidden love. When I was nothing more than some scraggly-haired middle schooler.

At first, I was just supposed to be imagining.

And yet, it didn't take too long for delusions to overtake reality.

Maryuin Koga—

The 'true name' I had given myself.

Right, an otherworldly soldier's name was always something like Mushanokouki Furea or Ootori Raisen or Hazama Kira. My mentality to give the character I created the greatest name ever spurred on such an overblown designation.

If it was just the name, that would be fine.

In various aspects of my school life, I began acting like a swordsman.

Like Suzuki Osamu and the others.

For example, I could never neglect a knight's duty to report to the prestigious Maryuin house. When the regulation time came, even if I was in class, I would speak to the magic stone embedded in my right arm (so the story went) to establish contact with the other world. The magic stone was a translator, a transmitter, it could even dispel the enemy's brainwashing magic, Gildiem.

"Is this the main house? This is Light Fang. As of the present time, I have failed to detect the divine dragon's aura."

That Light Fang which resounded colder than a Siberian blizzard was a code name. If anyone out there has a time machine, please go right ahead and kill that version of me. Take a load off my

shoulders.

My teachers yelled at me, my classmates were creeped out. But I wasn't moved. I never thought it was bad. I was drunk on delusion. The reactions I could easily imagine now, I could never anticipate back then. More so, I even thought that displaying true-to-life soldier pride would elicit respect from my surroundings.

I would cut down unseen enemies with my aura blade, protecting my classmates from invisible attacks, at times even suffering serious injury. I interacted with the soul of the evergreen growing in the schoolyard. In morning assemble, there was even a time I held a hand over a girl in my class and said, "You've been brainwashed. Rest at ease. I'll dispel that Gildiem right now." She cried. I was hit. I was called (to the staff room). By the way, I liked that girl.

Constantly repeating such acts where everyone could see, I was a complete outside existence.

Even so, there were still people who would hang out with me. The class naughties.

They would kick me down, strip me naked, grab me by the ankles, drag me down the hall (while naked), and finally throw me into the toilet. Good, do it more. Just end me. Even in the midst of that, "I can't use my powers on a student!" I would ceaselessly spew in place of a scream. What a nostalgic memory. I was so homesick, I thought I might flip the suicide switch.

For three long years, I lived a soldier's life, but naturally, the end had to come.

The chosen one hailing from another world, having disguised himself as a modern person, I harbored a tragic past of my true parents being killed by the Divine Dragon Astaloy. My transient parents were no more than a false family. My ties to them only superficial. The day came when- compelled by my deep sorrow- I placed those thoughts down on paper addressed to my beloved Princess Erina, who had remained in the other world. And that letter.

I placed in the post.

By the setting listed out in volume seven, to deliver a letter to the

other world, you merely have to write a nonexistent address and drop it into a rift in time. But I submitted a real envelope marked with the Maryu Seal (a ward so people couldn't arbitrarily open it), in a real post box.

The letter returned due to unknown destination. My parents read it without delay. Both my father and mother hit me and cried. In the end, we reached the stage where I was to undergo a brain scan, and I was sobbing too as I was made to confess to the garbage delusions birthed by my own hubris. The shock remedy forced me to escape from my fantasist spiral. The Gildiem was dispelled.

And just like that, I managed to return from Maryuin Koga back to Satou Ichirou. Satou Ichirou, a plain name. I didn't have any verbose middle name like 'Fenrir' or 'Odin', or any cool moniker like 'of the lightning' or 'heaven enforcer'. Just Satou, normal Ichirou. Three cheers.

There was much lost in my life as a soldier.

The sense of distance to my family wouldn't go away. Even now, I was like a tumor in the house. While our relations were peaceful on the surface, both my father and mother handled me gingerly.

My relationship with the big sister I'd gotten along so well with in elementary school was thoroughly destroyed. While I was a dream soldier, she directed terrible abuse. I was kicked, I was punched, I was threatened. My eardrum was ruptured right after the letter incident. After the devil had left me, my sister started taking distance. I could only talk to her cordially.

Delusions break reality. Even if I'd completely recovered from the sickness, my past folly wouldn't go away. Many of my classmates would use me as the butt of the joke, they would scoff, they would pull out their phones. I'd feel all special and show myself off to all the folks with their newest model cell phones. Whenever the lights flashed, the flowers of laughter would bloom from all over. What a convenient app. The Maryuin Koga photo collection.

And some way or another, Ooshima Yumina had obtained it.

Ryouko stopped coming to school.

“What do you think happened to Ryouko-chan?”

Pretending to immerse myself in the homework that had just been issued the class before, I let Kobato-san’s voice slip by. Granted, my mechanical pencil didn’t seem to be doing any moving for all the work I was supposed to be engrossed in.

Air. An existence that doesn’t stand out. Assimilate with the classroom surroundings as much as possible.

“Ichirou-kun, did you hear anything?” Itou asked me.

“... Nothing.

“Did you try calling?”

“She’s keeping her phone off.”

In order to feign uninvolvedness, I ended up telling yet another small lie. I didn’t make any calls, nor did I receive any.

This was the peace I had gone as far as to thrust out divorce papers to obtain.

... And yet, I was still in the dumps. Thanks to the unease Ryouko left behind, I wasn’t talking much with Kobato-san or Itou anymore. With the hindrance eliminated, we should have been able to spend a fun and wacky time together. And yet we couldn’t. If I was going to be alone in the end anyway, I didn’t have to subjugate myself to Ooshima’s threads but did I really have to go so far to earn the right to submerge myself in a world of Ryouko’s wildest dreams? Even I had to say it was pathetic to cling to a daily life that had already fallen apart.

The break time ended without my homework progressing a single line. When Dorisen came, we stood and bowed. Classes began. I couldn’t put my heart into it.

“... Dammit.”

At this rate, midterms were going to be a catastrophe.

What was I supposed to do? Was there another clear shortcut I could take?

“Satou, have you heard anything about what happened with Ladies?”

That break time, Dorisen interrogated me.

“I don’t know... she suddenly stopped coming.”

“She was searching for something, wasn’t she? Could she be busy with that?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know... umm, I have to use the restroom so...”

“Ah, Satou...”

It would be next to impossible to fool Dorisen. I fled to the bathroom and returned without using its facilities. While it seemed Dorisen had withdrawn to the faculty room, Ryouko was there, waiting in his place.

“Geh.”

There was only one reason she would come to the classroom.

“Ichirou, upon considering the particulars of the document in question, it has become clear that it details the production process of the Dragon Terminal. By the plenipotentiary power holder’s expectations, the profit this discovery will bring to the Central Assembly is tremendous. Therefore, The Researcher is currently considering temporarily placing all missions on ice to return to the organization at once.”

“I-I see...”

“Construction of the temple has already proceeded in secret. Very little time is required until its completion.”

“A temple, eh...”

This is bad. If I talk with Ryouko too much, it could cost me my life. As luck would have it, Ooshima was in the classroom. The sharp-sighted queen bee had no reservations to stare straight at us.

Perhaps my wariness of her was transmitted, as she purposely opened her phone and waved it around for me to see.

I tensed up. It was precisely because I had experienced hell that the fear brought my body to cower.

I couldn’t let it get out by any means. This wasn’t logic, it was primordial instinct.

So I plainly told her.

“I can’t help you.”

Since I couldn’t expect a proper response from Ryouko, I took a page out of her book and went ahead with my own schedule.

I one-sidedly said only what I wanted to say.

“I can’t help you anymore. Not in the search nor in the construction of your temple. I do think I’ve fulfilled my obligation, and while I’m sorry, this is as far as I go. You can handle the rest on your own.”

You’re the only one who needs to be wrapped up in your delusions. I took my seat without waiting for an answer. From the front, “Oh, it’s a lover’s tiff,” someone in the front jeered. I ignored them, naturally. With sluggish gestures, I prepared for class. Ryouko stood beside me.

“The site to erect a temple has already been decided. All that remains is to build it. Simple and convenient. As the structure need not be deemed habitable, many essential steps can be skipped in construction with no issue. It can even be an Aneha-class fabrication.”

“.....”

Opposite the usual, I was the one ignoring Ryouko.

“What the temple construction requires is the accurate deployment of resonance to bring about a ritual effect, and that calculation will make use of the numerological system known in this world as gematria. To implement operation, a third party’s mutual observation-type direct social link must be distributed to varying degrees, but as The Researcher will become defenseless in that timeframe alone, a cooperator with high scanning abilities will prove necessary—”

Just give it up. I sluggishly pulled out my textbook as I waited for the pressure to leave.

“And when the temple is completed, by imputing the desired special coordinates through numerological disassembly, the gate, an exceedingly ambiguous domain between two worlds will be generated.”

When my preparations were over, I stretched my back and closed my eyes. Even as I put on an inorganic disguise, the incessantly bounding voice continued dancing in my ear with no end. A never-ending nightmare. I prayed silently it had to end someday. When I suspended my thoughts, a sense of guilt began oozing in.

Please. Just give up. Do something to protect yourself.

It was painful enough to want to cry out. Was this my recompense? Was my recompense for spending three years in folly not over yet? I broke my family apart, lost myself, and spread pictures to how many hundreds... are you saying I still have to atone?

The voice ceased. Did she finally leave?

I thoughtlessly turned my head to immediately regret it. Ryouko was still stood right before me.

"Ichirou, understood."

"Understood what?"

She was suddenly sounding admirable.

"Consideration has definitely been lacking. Apology."

"That's a bit late... I'm not particularly angry, you don't have to apologize."

"The Researcher does bear a minor understanding of a resident of the phenomenal realm's sense of values."

From the gap in her robe, she stuck out the top of her staff. Her fingertip flipped open one of its multiple lids. As the inner pressure released, the crude stacks of bills sloppily saw the light of day.

"Your reward was never paid."

Money—

Cash, notes, bills. A large mass of ten-thousand-yen notes. The easily few hundred thousand I'd witnessed once before were scooped out in their entirety and held out to me.

"Huh? What?"

"This is all Ichirou's. So..." as if that would resolve the matter.

"Please help again."

The chill I felt at that moment surpassed any I had experienced before.

"... Are you serious?"

"It is possible to procure local currency. Although it isn't unlimited... with this much, if you still require more... it will be provided. Immediate is impossible, but in the near future."

"Wait," who was giving her money? "That's your parent's money, right?"

“The Researcher does not possess parents.”

“Stop. Don’t even joke about that.”

“It is a fact. No blood relatives exist in this world. While there are provisional parents in place... they are, in the end, no more than a mimesis.”

Why do we have to be so similar, I wanted to cry out. I tasted the feeling of finding my own faults amplified. If she was a man, I’d have smacked her.

“Are you an idiot?”

I unconsciously stood. Pointing at the door, I put out a voice imbued with anger from the heart.

“Get out. Don’t ever talk to me again.”

“... Ah...”

Words can never perfectly convey the message.

What you feel in your heart will never perfectly reach. Even between those who understood one another. It was never as easy as sending an image.

But at that time alone, I felt the sensation of my anger being delivered in full. It came with the discomfort of a blade embedding into flesh.

Ryouko’s eyes dropped to around the tips of her toes, “... Meaning,” she muttered before leaving the classroom in a sprint. The power suddenly left my body, I sunk into my seat.

“W-why? What happened?”

From the seat one up and two the right, Kobato-san directed a perplexed face.

Yeah, I wonder why. There’s no way I could answer that.

That same day, over lunch break as I returned from the cafeteria, I found a folded notebook paper placed on my desk. These sorts of secretive measures were reserved for women, and I immediately identified the paper that had been arbitrarily ripped out of a book with the edge left a mess as a message from Ooshima.

‘Dear Koga-kun,
I’ve got a little present to reward you for fighting the good fight!
You should hurry and check you know where! Chop-chop, before
someone finds it!’

She was making fun of me. But I couldn’t leave it alone.
You know where... she meant the landing. She was informing me
she had left something there. Quite likely, a lethal blast from the
past.

I made for it at once. I climbed two steps at a time. There was
nothing on the landing. When I went even further to the penthouse
portion, a large paper bag that hadn’t been there before had been
left there.

Timidly, I peeked inside.

“.....!”

I found something far worse than what I’d been expecting.
It would have easily dropped me to the depths of the earth. She
didn’t even have to prepare a dead cat or a swarm of bugs. All she
had to do was ask around her friends to pin down the location of the
must-have item that would not only get a laugh, but also that Satou
Ichirou had to suppress.

I had always hidden that at school. What had- by some trick of fate-
disappeared before graduation was undoubtedly retrieved and
preserved by someone with ill intent. In the transition between
schools, there was one time I was called out. I had ignored it, but if I
participated, I was certain it would have been implemented for
some grand send-off harassment.

I had to dispose of it. Before anyone saw. I couldn’t bring it to the
classroom. Because I didn’t think Ooshima would let sleeping dogs
lie. My only option was to ditch school. I’d take it home, cut it up,
and burn it.

I draped the paper bag over my shoulder. I had to escape without
any teachers seeing.

As expected... the escape was successful.

I went out of my way to collect my shoes and break out through the
boys’ lavatory. It made it all the easier to leave the premise without

being seen. That point of infiltration from that night proved useful. All that was left was to be careful of disciplinary action later.

While I was pulling my bike away from the schoolhouse, it entered my eye by chance.

“T-the heck is that...!”

Something outrageous had been brazenly erected over the off-limits roof.

“Are those... desks?”

A giant piece of arts put together from student desks.

Only a single small shadow was vigorously at work. There was no mistaking that blue robe.

The roof. Temple. Construction. A number of curious words had entered my ears that morning.

Ryouko had her eyes on the roof from the beginning.

Presumably, no one noticed. Not the students nor the teachers.

Only I was able to spot it by sheer coincidence. I had a bad feeling.

Was it because I had thrust Ryouko away?

I should have noticed.

Her eccentric tendencies. Once her switch was flipped, she'd be buried in her own world with no turning back. She was the sort of human who could sink with just a wish. And her work was precise down to the last detail.

I simply had to recall what happened when I first saw her outfit by the light of the moon. What became of me when I had already had my fill of delusions.

Temple. What linked another world to the phenomenal realm. The grandest of worlds to come out of Ryouko's hands. I had to go. I couldn't overlook it. I had to ascertain it with my own eyes.

Leaving my bike toppled on its side, I returned to school.

The incident would surely be over soon.

I shoved the paper bag into the bathroom tool closet. That was a cursed item. I doubted it would be found if it was just for a short while.

En route to the penthouse, I crossed the hallway lined with first-floor classrooms. A great many students had exited to the hall. Even teachers were standing around, gazing absentmindedly at the stairwell that led up.

“Hey, first years, get back to your classrooms!”

A teacher for another class cried out to no avail. Barely anyone was even listening. The closer I got to the stairs, the more the boisterous atmosphere grew. I approached Class A. The stairs to the roof had been sealed off by teachers so no students could use it.

“Ichirou-kun!”

“Kobato-san?”

Almost all of Class A’s students were in the hall.

“Big trouble! Ryouko-chan... she holed herself up on the roof!”

“I saw from outside. She’s locked herself in?”

“I don’t know! The teachers are having a look now!”

“So they already found her.”

“Ichirou-kun, don’t tell me, back there...”

Her hands locked in front of her chest were lightly shaking.

“... Yeah, probably.”

That exchange that couldn’t escalate to a dispute ended up being the last trigger. Was it my responsibility? You could call it that.

“You think Ryouko-chan’s going to maintain a siege?”

“It might be worse than that.”

“Is there any way we can save her?”

I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t tell what sort of saving Ryouko actually wanted.

“Satou! You’re back!” As Dorisen came down the stairs, he quickly singled me out. “That’s wonderful, I panicked when I couldn’t sense your aura on campus. Come with me.”

Accompanying the teacher who read his students’ auras, I was allowed down the stairs to the penthouse.

“The one on the roof’s Ryouko, right?”

“So it seems. She must have broken the lock the school installed to get on the roof.”

“What about the police?”

“That’ll have to happen after we get in touch with the principal, but we haven’t reached him yet. His phone’s off. But if possible, I don’t want to make a police matter of it.”

“I doubt this is the time to worry about appearances.”

Dorisen spoke in a terribly serious face.

“... If it becomes a police matter, she won’t be able to come to school anymore.”

“So you want me to do something about it?”

I’m beat. I threw up both hands like it was a hold-up.

“... I want you to look at the situation and decide what should be done. You’re the person who understands her best.”

Dorisen took the lead, pushing out the sealed-off door ever so slightly. The gap was around thirty centimeters. If I squeezed through horizontally, I’d barely be able to make it.

“This is as far as it opens. Have a look.”

I stuck out my head to find a large, looming iron grid.

“What?”

What I had thought was a grill had been made from the locked legs of desks protruding up, down, left and right. Countless desks had been stacked like blocks in various orientations, fixed with wire into a sturdy grid barricade. The height was just around three meters.

“Inomata-sensei forcefully slammed into it, and somehow or another, we got a small gap. But we won’t be able to enter with our builds. How about it, Satou, won’t you go see how things are going over there?”

If I squeezed out the door and climbed up the desks, I might be able to make it to the other side.

“I can’t see through. The wooden desktops are blocking off too many points...”

There was no telling what was happening there unless I made the trip. That’s what it meant.

“Satou, can I leave it to you?”

“... That’s an order, isn’t it.”

For a moment, Dorisen made a pained face, but soon he had regained his usual brazen smile.

"I'm really sorry, but that's right. You're my best choice. I don't want to choose the other options."

A man who doesn't run is cool. But I'm sure that was also part of his calculations.

"... I'll give it a go."

"Then could you equip this?" Dorisen stuck a small pin into my chest pocket.

"And this is?"

"A pin mike. I want to hear the conversation."

"... Sensei, I think you'd be well suited for an occupation of deceiving people."

"Isn't teacher precisely that job?"

"Eeh!?"

I crammed my body into the gap. It was far too narrow, I felt pressure on both side of my body. Squeezing only my left shoulder through, I groped around to find a hold and pulled the rest of me through. Taking care not to get caught on the doorknob, I climbed up the gap between the pend house wall and barricade.

With friction constantly rubbing against my back, as long as I brought my arms and legs to the right place, it wasn't particularly hard. I clambered to the top. The barricade was three desks in breadth; I wasn't in any danger even standing right on top of it. From that height, I gazed out over the roof in its entirety.

"... For real?"

I swallowed my breath. Like the instant a vivid painting entered my eye, my heart hit out just one large pulse.

Ryouko called it a temple.

when one hears the word temple, just what vision would them embrace? The Parthenon? Or could it be the temple city of the Mayan Civilization?

Ryouko's temple held a different aspect from either of them.

It was just a vague resemblance, but hers had something that harkened back to Cheval's ideal. The Le Palais Ideal, or Ideal Palace, was a stone structure built up by a man called Cheval who, without any knowledge of stonemasonry, stacked up the rocks he

picked up on the side of the road while working as a postman. It was a palace he made in his own garden. Worthy of an illusion drawn straight from a human's heart, it boasted a hair-raising figure.

What Cheval had done in stone, Ryouko had accomplished with desk and chair.

"How am I supposed to believe this..."

The roof was now a rectangle cut straight out of another world. A stagnant crystal sprouting like fungus straight up from the green rubber-like floor. A bizarre, surreal landscape put together with nothing but mundane office supplies.

If you kept the image of a perfect palace in mind and focused your eyes, it began to resemble the feeling of Lego. Detailed yet uncanny. Ryouko had focused solely on stacking isomorphic blocks of desks, erecting steeples, casting bridges, sprouting pincushions, a trapezoidal structure resting in the center. I was filled with an urge to look away, and yet my eyes were fixed in place.

I couldn't believe this was prepared in only a few hours.

She must have spent ages preparing all of this. For a long time now. On top of the main alter positioned as if protected by the flood of steeples, there stood Ryouko.

"Oy, Ryouko!"

Her robe fluttering, She turned, every motion brimming with dignity.

"The temple is complete."

"Did you make this because of what I said!?"

"....."

"There's a huge ruckus going on below!"

"Irrelevant. They are unable to perceive our side."

"It's exceedingly relevant!"

I searched out a path to Ryouko. The roof's original flooring only remained on the outmost edge.

With paths and bridges prepared to every important point, it was somewhat like a maze, but with how jumbled it all was, I couldn't see a route on first glance. At the foot of the barrier, overturned

desk and chair legs were spread over like a bed of spikes. The broken desks had parts where their legs were snapped or twisted, making for plenty of places that would impale me if I fell. The usable routes were limited.

“I’ll be on my way!”

“Don’t come. Don’t enter the barrier.”

“You think I can listen to that? Let’s talk a bit.”

I descended to the other side of the barrier. I stepped on the only place where desktops formed an overpass.

“Don’t come,” Ryouko mechanically repeated. “Don’t come.”

“... I’m sorry about before. I said too much. But that doesn’t mean you had to do all this, right? I’ll help out. I can still help, so how about we slow down for a minute and have a good talk?”

The path led to the altar. While largely meandering, it was properly laid out.

With each turning corner, a new layer was added on.

“Hey, why did you do this?”

The witch standing up high no longer paid me any mind. She stood alone atop the temple, the highest structure on the roof.

“Hey, got you so upset? Haven’t you always only done whatever you wanted to? Why did you have to make it this overblown?”

“Explanation has been provided numerous times. A temple is necessary to return to the original world.”

“If you’re up to listen, I’ll tell you everything that’s going on with me. It’s not like we’re done for good. But this one is bad, I tell you. Even our teacher won’t be able to cover for you.”

“There is no need to be covered for.”

“Why?”

All of a sudden, I was faced with stairs leading down. There was only one road, so I could only move forward. With both sides sandwiched between desk-lattice walls, I descended into a deep, deep darkness. Ryouko left my sight.

She had even made a tunnel. Just how much passion and concentration were required to create this labyrinth... just thinking about it made me dizzy. Without the inexhaustible energy one

under a delusion occasionally exhibited, it could never have been actualized.

"So this... is your ideal world..."

The tunnel gradually narrowed out. If any one of the higher desks collapsed, I wouldn't be getting out unharmed. I couldn't imagine Ryouko had any knowledge pertaining to construction. It was even less likely she drew up a blueprint. Growing increasingly anxious, I pressed on through the darkness.

I exited out into a shaft. A ladder had been formed by meshing chairs together.

I climbed.

I reached a place where the sunlight poured down. The top part of the temple.

"When Ichirou refuses to return with The Researcher, he ventured so far..."

One level higher than the terrace-like place I stood, there was Ryouko. Checkmate.

A meter apart. There was nothing left to separate us. As I would climb onto the stage in the gym, I pushed both my hands down against it, built some momentum—

"Don't come, Ichirou!"

The scream rampant with emotion stiffened my limbs.

I suddenly sensed the boundary line. It was there, right beneath hands. Meaning, that single step up. I could tell it was dangerous to cross that line. I figured it out with some thought. If this temple was the landscape in Ryouko's mind, then it might just be her heart itself.

"Don't come."

Ryouko took a step back.

The highest point of the temple consisted of sixteen desks. I recalled cleaning the classroom, when we pushed the desks against the back for floor access. She had made a foothold of three by three, with the remaining seven leading to the depths in a straight line, Ryouko was headed for that back path. While I felt something was off, I couldn't tell why. For the time being, I tried out conversation.

“What is it? Why are you running away?”

“... Because Ichirou became a person of that side.”

Her sunken voice quivered here and there, sounding terribly unreliable. Ryouko was tired, she was nearing her limit.

“That’s right. I’m from this side. You knew that from the start.”

“That’s wrong. Ichirou was different. Another Ichirou was hiding. I could see it, that’s why,” Another step, she retreated back, “I wanted to return with you. I wanted you to see.”

“What did you want me to see?”

“My world.”

I noticed, this wasn’t a line from the delusional setting’s Researcher. Ryouko’s own words were not coming down to me. A rapid chemical reaction kicked off in my brain. Joy, anger, surprise, happiness, irritation.

“... The temple was a facility to return, was it?”

“Correct.”

“This is definitely something. It’s on an epic scale. I knew you put work into your costume, but this is something else. You’ve got me. I’ll praise you. I’ll acknowledge you’re amazing. But... where do you intend to return with this?”

“To the world I used to be.”

“It doesn’t exist. You know that too, don’t you?”

Ryouko silently took another step back. A warning signal began ringing in my heart. It was dangerous to continue this conversation, my instincts shrilly cried out. But why?

“You’ll perform a ritual and return... I get it up to that point. But what if you can’t return? What if, after the ceremony, there’s nothing but a boring reality waiting for you? What will you do?” Will you be able to endure that?

“After the ceremony, reality will disappear.”

Ryouko retreated back another desk’s worth down the passage. She was growing further and further away.

“Hm?”

Without crossing the boundary, I slid my right hand to the side. While I didn’t have a perfect view, I probed out what portion of the

roof Ryouko was standing over. And my leisure vanished all at once.

“Are you an idiot!?”

The green fence surrounding the roof ran right below her. I understood. The temple had been built along the fence.

And the passage—this was the identity of that off feeling—protruded out beyond it. Like a diving board into a pool.

Naturally, if she fell from that passage, her landing point would no longer be the roof.

The height of the school added on to the temple was roughly twenty meters. It was amply high enough to destroy the human body.

My lips shook. An emotion interwoven out of irritation and confusion almost made me empty my bowels.

“What’s with that!? Why does it have to be that way!?”

There’s no way, I thought.

When it came to this girl, I never thought she was the sort to run to death.

“So you wanted to die...?”

“It is not death,” said the usual tone that spoke of her absurd delusions. “In order to return, it is necessary to convert any individual differences adapted to this side. Freefall is the most adequate state to perform that ritual. The transfer will be complete before collision with the ground.”

“Do you believe that? Seriously, that nonsense?”

No matter what delusions she held, she must know in the depths of her heart they were a downright lie. To actually jump was an impossible option unless she really was depressed enough to die.

Then did Ryouko seriously believe in another world? That there really was a place different from here, that she could reach it? That a place born naught but from imagination, the strange scenery taking root in her heart actually existed? There was no possible way—I thought, then remembered.

There was.

The suicide scandal of soldier syndrome. Unable to recognize death and death, there really were those who lightly tested it out as a

means to separate their souls.

Looking back, when I sent the letter to my princess, despite understanding somewhere, “It probably won’t reach,” wasn’t I immersing myself in a foolish hope, “But it might”?

When a dream far too strong boards a feeble heart, the boundary line grows endlessly ambiguous. Past life and present one, reality and fantasy, life and death become lenient. In all her panic, Ryouko had unhandedly what faint rationality she had, crossing over the boundary of life and death, that which was to never be lost sight of. A formidable foe.

Satou Ryouko... no, the Carbon-Based Activity-Body from another world, the Blue Witch, The Researcher was a powerful foe the current me had no means of crossing blades with.

“Give up on returning! Can’t you just spend the rest of your life here?”

“Ichirou, I ask, do you honestly think this world is enjoyable?”

“That’s,” she threw me a question I couldn’t lie to. “... You’re right. I’m a human who can never adapt to what it means to be a normal high school student. But I’m doing my best, can’t you see!?”

“I can’t do my best.”

“Why not!?”

“Because it’s narrowminded.”

“Who is?”

“The world.”

Yeah, well— unfortunately, I had to hand it to her on that one. She was right. We were all competing in our own narrowmindedness. If we weren’t narrowminded, we would be scared, far too scared to bear. We wanted to feel at ease with everything fit in its mold. If you stand out, you get stuck with the label of creepy.

But all I, all we really. For god, for magic, for monsters, for mysteries, for miracles, for legends, for the end— something to reassure us to live on. No one wants to go to karaoke when we know we’ll never enjoy it, or spend a fortune on fashion, or wag our tails at people we don’t even like.

“In the end, Ichirou never showed me. I was sure we were the same

inside.”

Touching a hand to her chest, she scooped out the lake of her heart. She was sure to scoop out some rusted filth. Yet what her palm wrapped around radiated a transparent glimmer.

“The warrior in Ichirou is long gone. In that case... I... I...”

I never knew. Her heart’s jewel wouldn’t rust. It was even like a curse to her.

And Ryouko cried out.

“Alone—there is nothing left but to return alone!”

Ryouko brushed various parts of her body as she recited her chant.

“To return... return... to the world it should be... Ateh Malkuth Ve-Geburah... couldn’t have been wrong... there’s no way I was wrong... Ichirou was definitely supposed to be on this side... so why...”

Swinging her staff, she mumbled, she muttered.

The warning signals were ringing again. It was a bad idea to instigate her now. But even if I didn’t instigate her, Ryouko would jump. Should I contain her by force? Impossible. She could jump from the diving board far faster than anything I tried.

Even so, there was just one method to deliver words to her heart.

But, choosing that would be the end, I was already—

“... Hah.”

It was too late for that. Looks like you can’t run from fate.

In that case, to the end—No, don’t intend to let it get to that.

Just once.

One single last time. Why not have a battle.

“Ryouko, can you wait there for a bit? I’ll be right back.”

“To return... return... mission over... return... once she is back, the Researcher will have her memories wiped at the biological enhancement center, and she won’t feel anything anymore... it won’t hurt anymore...”

“I’ll be right back! Just five minutes! You got that, wait five minutes!”

I retraced the way I came. My buttons flew as my shirt was caught up by desk legs. Protruding splintered wood grazed my face, forming a wide abrasion. Blood trickled bit by bit, dying the top of

my shoulder.

It took one minute to return to the penthouse.

Dorisen pulled me aside.

“Satou, should I call the police?”

“Please give me just a little more time. I’ll be right back! Don’t let anyone else in!”

I ran. I sprinted at full force.

I raced past the classroom. Without calling out to Kobato-san on the verge of tears, I made for that boy’s lavatory. For the first time in my life, I felt grateful to Ooshima. To think she would procure it for me today of all days. Her strong malice had established but a single small miracle.

Treatment came with some pain. But that was none of my business. I’ll just have to give Dorisen and myself, and Ryouko and the school, everyone some painful memories to cringe over. Suck on that.

And I—was ready for battle.

I raced down the long hallway from Class E to Class A.

The looks from the students in the halls pierced in painfully. That charm-watcher girl from before was staring in mute amazement.

Sorry for tricking you. This is who I am.

Everyone backed off to form a path. Rather, on my approach, everyone shrieked and avoided me.

Naturally, there was no one who wouldn’t pull back after seeing my form.

“The heck is that!?” “Giga creep!” “We’ve got a loon!” “Hey, hey!”

The numerous inappropriate laughed I never wanted to hear, even as I listened to that negative encouragement, I was invincible. In middle school, no matter what anyone said, I believed I was a cool swordsman. There was never a doubt in my mind. Nothing in the world could harm me. It was the sort of absurdity that could only come from denseness, it was being oblivious, and being painful, but it was undoubtedly invincible.

I'm wrong. Yeah, of course I'm wrong. Of course I'm stupid. But I can say this with certainty. The power of heart had once bestowed limitless toughness and self-confidence unto a mid-built scraggly-haired middle school boy. Just you watch. Do you think anyone could do the same as me after learning the shame? Those challengers that press forward no matter what shame awaits them are what the internet calls Heroes. Doesn't that refer to me? I, Satou Ichirou, am a miracle embodied.

Inexperienced as I was, that was all I could use at the moment. But this power that, if used well, could convert at least one impossible into possible, was what I recognized as magic.

Protect me, my magic barrier! It can just be for a moment, support up someone as feeble as me! Give a coward some courage! Enchant me with the strength to be honest!

In my left hand, the Dragonslaying blade— One-Eyed Dragon Masamune. In my right hand, the Magic Stone of Thanatos.

My body was clad in a tight jet-black long coat, opened in a V shape at the chest with armored shoulders.

The wig for cosplay purposes was inevitably silver long hair. The strongest swordsman of the Mirror World—that was me, Maryuin Koga.

I wasn't in my early twenties, I didn't have glistening hair growing to my hips, and if I walked down the streets, my looks weren't dashing enough for everyone to turn an eye, I was just an unpopular high school buy. But I was Maryuin Koga and no one else. I took up the blade I had once discarded, stepping onto the battlefield once more.

This was Maryuin Koga's last battle—!

"Whoah, look who's here!" "Take a pic!" "For real!" "Kyaah!"

"Bweh!" "What the heck is is going on!?"

Go ahead, take them. Take however many you want! For I am he unmatched in the mirror world, the peerless black-winged swordsman! For Satou Ichirou was but the guise for the young patriot called Maryuin Koga! Come closer and revere my transcendent foooooorrrm!

I ran past them without slowing, passing by Kobato-san's side again. For some reason, in an expression of tears and smiles, she stuck up her thumb.

"You're looking cool! Go get her!"

Cool? Not in a million years. There's something wrong with Kobato-san. But... for some reason, a heated juvenile power was poured into me by the gallon. I returned the thumb to return the favor.

"Is that Mens!?" "Whoah, It is Koga-dono, the lost!" "Maryuin, take care of it!" "What a powerful wave of energy! So this is his true power!" "May the lord guide his plight!" "Impossible! Is he equipped for a final battle!?" "Your blood flows through my veins, I won't allow you to die off so easily!"

For today alone, I'll happily accept the soldier's encreepagement.

"Sensei! I'm ready to go!"

"Oh, you're back! My best choice!"

"Mens-chan, break a leg~."

In the time I was changing, Dorisen and— for some reason— the nurse were pushing against the barricade. You have my gratitude. The gap was now around fifty centimeters. Easy picking!

"I'll take all responsibility. Satou, give it all you've got!"

"Understood!"

Borrowing momentum from my full-force sprint, feeling the very speed of a Miyazaki Anime (subject to personal interpretation), I clambered up the barricade. And... I confirmed Ryouko's survival on the sky alter ten meters away. Rudely enough, she wouldn't look at me anymore. Her heart was already growing distant. I unsheathed One-Eyed Dragon Masamune.

Long, long ago, an otaku college student made a replica katana to commemorate their graduation and bequeathed it to me.

Unfortunately, it wasn't taller than I was, as the setting went, but it should be enough to break away those hindering protrusions.

"ORYAAAAAAH! Hidden moooooove! Demon Blade Nanashiki!"

Or was it Hidden Sword Nanashiki? ... Well, whatever. Anyway, I jumped down from the pass to the pit of spikes. Pipe legs smacked against my lower body. It hurt. I endured the pain. I'd be fine even

if I bled. I was protected by the defensive effect of the Maryu seal. Bending beyond repair, the false katana snapped the rusted leg off of a desk in my way. And— I launched an attack on the temple from the shortest possible distance.

“Ryoooooooooooooooo!”

I put all my thoughts into my lungs.

“You’re lonely, aren’t you!”

The fake katana was almost bent a full ninety degrees. But I pushed straight on. I stumbled again and again, smacking my chest, my stomach, my shoulders, my forehead into the pipe legs. Kuh. Had I been in my golden age, my Maryu sense would have perfectly fended off all these petty attacks!

“Open your ears, Ryouko!”

Tattered as I became, I clumsily clung to the temple. How about that, aren’t I cool? (Yes, that was sarcasm).

“I am... the strongest swordsman who hails from the mirror world, Maryuin Koga! Despite carrying with me the trait of evil, I placed my allegiance with the absolute good that was the Divine Dragon, the greatest, most badass, dark hero of all!”

Having come so far, my fatigue started coming out, but no time to rest. I redirected every ounce of power in my body to driving my limbs. While my consciousness grew faint, my body and soul kept their sights on the top.

“The strongest blade of the Twenty-Four Generals who worshiped and served the Divine Dragon Astaloy! But... betrayed by none other than Astaloy, the lord who I served, I lost my comrades and my family!

“For a time, I found myself on the brink of death, the core of my power, my dragon soul crushed, my magic immediately brought all the way down to Rank D; yet even still, as a single avenger, I set out on a journey to slay Astaloy!

“Over my long and lonely journey, all manner of misfortune befell me. Old friends became foes, the little sister I thought was dead was being abused as a source of magical power, and even my birthplace was razed by the accursed Astaloy, but...”

Even I couldn't tell the state of things at this point.

I just spewed out what I had to say one after the next. I didn't think anything would come of speaking out delusions, but the early danger detection system within me stayed silent, as if to tell me this was how it should be.

"I encountered princess Erina, who had become queen of this ruined land, we were gradually drawn to one another... the long journey for revenge had worn my heart far too thin."

Huh? Did I have a setting like that? I didn't remember it? Did I just come up with it now?

"Before I knew it... I began dreaming of a place without conflict, a life I could live with my heart at ease. A world Princess Erina and the remaining wanderers could live without all the senseless killing... there, there would be a world with no war, where humans would have the right to live as humans, where all children would be able to go to school, and where lovers would be able to speak of their love with no reserve. Princess Erina's divination was able to find such a world.

"That was this realm... it was this world!"

One hand touched the top stratum of the temple. But it wouldn't move any longer. It would no longer lift my body another centimeter. Had I run out of mana? I became an ornament of the temple. I would eventually run out of power completely and fall. So I threw out my final words.

"Astaloy's next attack robbed me of my life. It wasn't only me that died. The mirror world itself was shattered, it fell to ruin. But in exchange for her own life, Princess Erina made it so my soul was reincarnated into the transient realm. There was but one miscalculation, Astaloy's army that happened to be present were transferred to the same realm along with me. In order to protect this world, I fought them. They followed me to middle school. They were reincarnated as bullies. I fought them for three years, and I came out the victor. I survived. The battle was over... and now, I live as but a mere high school student."

What is with these sudden developments... quite pathetic, if I do say

so myself. Are these really the best delusions my mind can come up with?

“That’s right. Ryouko... those Dragon Terminals your collecting... those are fragments of the dragon Astaloy. They should never be carried out to another world by any means. That’s why, if you plan to take them back with you... Ryouko, are you listening? If you plan on taking them away...”

My body wouldn’t move. Only my voice came out.

“I’ll stop you, even if it costs me my life!!”

And as if God had grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, my body was hoisted up to the temple.

It wasn’t by my own strength. Naturally, it wasn’t a miracle. When I raised my face, I caught a glimpse of the culprit, clinging to me as she pulled me up.

“The heck is that?”

She was crying.

From her large eyes, large drops of tears spilled out. Crying her heart out, Ryouko rested my head on her lap. How water droplets fell on my face.

“Ryouko, the place you want to go... I also... there was a time I tried going there too.”

“Ichirou too...?”

“Yeah. I fought as a dream soldier for three years. I was bullied the whole time, and whenever it got painful, I would delude myself more... in the end, I got into a feud with my family, and tried to run off to my own world. So I know.”

Ryouko caringly stroked my face.

“It’s a dead end. The road you’re aiming for. It doesn’t go anywhere.”

“But I hate staying in this world.”

“I get you. It’s stupid, ain’t it? School and stuff, it’s all really stupid. There are good things... but the bad outweighs it several times. But try thinking about it. This world might not have magic or monsters, but at least it’s got enemies. You can fight to your heart’s content... granted, they’re all invisible enemies.”

“... It’s impossible, I can’t fight something like that...”

“Sure you can” At that moment, I saw a path for Ryouko to escape.

“I mean, you’ve fought those invisible enemies all the way here.”

Twice the tears as before fell on me all at once.

“... Even in this world... heroes, and warriors, and witches can exist... so you can’t take the dead end. You’ve got to go beyond the third-floor landing. If you think there’s a way out there, it’s just an illusion.”

“Then... what am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. All I could do was restart from scratch... but, if it’s you... you might be able to do it.”

You might not have noticed it, but Ryouko, you’re amazing.

You can tell just by looking at this labyrinth of art. I’m sure you have a special path ahead of you.

“I can’t do it. I can’t do it alone.”

“You can. Just level up, and you can do anything.”

“I can’t. I’ll be crushed before that.”

“You won’t be crushed if I’m with you.”

My eyes grew hazy. The fatigue on my heart and body was heavy.

This was the price one paid for using berserk. I reached out my hand. Ryouko grasped it without a moment’s delay. With her hand small and fragile like a child’s, she gripped it with a surprising amount of force. I gripped back. With my right hand, the magic stone inlayed.

“There, I’ve caught you. I’ve finally undone your Gildiem. Now that you’ve woken from your dream, you can’t return again. You’ve got no choice left but to live in pain in this world... just like me.”

“... That’s terrible. You’re bullying me.”

“I’m a dark hero, after all. But I’ll at least provide aftercare. I’ll take you on adventures in this world as well.”

“You can’t, there aren’t any adventures in...”

“There are.”

“Where?”

I couldn’t see her face anymore. Only the teardrops warmed by her body heat came down my face like rain. How very comfortable. The

pipe of emotion was connected, finally, between me and her. I must be a terrible person to enjoy her tears. I really do possess the evil attribute.

“Like at the DIY Store. Maybe Daiso.”

“That’s not an adventure.”

“You’re making light of DIY. You’re insulting the do it yourself spirit. You know, Vis even sells carnivorous plants, and the DIY-store and Daiso are labyrinths revived in the modern day. Just step in, and you might even run into the DIY Demon Lord. Hey, appearance-wise, he’s just a normal old man, but his arms are a sight to behold. What I’m trying to say is, make light of DIY, and you DIE. I’ll teach you all the tricks.”

I’m sure you’ll need some new techniques from here on, anyway.

“The heck is that... how stupid, stupid.”

Perhaps overcome with emotion, Ryouko let out one last sob. And... when she raised her voice next, it was a laugh. Her teary voice mingled in, and the finish was like an emotional dud, but... that was the first laugh I’d ever heard from her.

An overwhelming sense of accomplishment.

I laughed too. Mine was powerless, I could only emit a chipped voice.

Eventually, Ryouko whispered in a gentle tone.

“... The ritual failed. It’s all your fault.”

Turning my last strength into a grin, my switch was flipped off.

I heard quite a bit happened after that, but let’s speed things up a bit.

To start off, Ryouko and I were taken to the infirmary, and after undergoing first aid, I was sent to the hospital. I just had a few scrapes, nothing major. This being my second time, the doctor was grinning. I was released in the evening, I returned home.

The objet d’art on the roof brought with it large repercussions.

The ill deeds of a student. Unforgivable—

While there was immediately a rallying cry to take it down, the art

teacher was vehemently against it. Her resistance was so intense, that it just so happened she went as far as to lock herself away beyond the barricade in Ryouko's place, shifting the problem to something completely different.

Our art teacher was a member of a certain famous art association, her art-related social circle far wider-reaching than could be anticipated from her gloomy looks. A great many art experts, people with exaggerated titles dropped by the school in hopes of inspecting the temple on the roof. Our principal who had turned off his phone at such an urgent time to make merry with anime pachinko machines would have much of his time occupied dealing with such visitors.

Our art teacher's faith in the arts, our other teachers' feelings, the school's speculations, and the self-interest of the art experts. As a result of all the intermingled intentions, by stated reason of, 'it seemed like such a good idea', the fantasy temple at the center of the ruckus really did end up as a sacred inviolable holy land.

(Ryouko's amazing.)

Teachers are those who are supposed to condemn students for unconventional action, and this time was the same. No matter what artistic value it may hold, our school wouldn't accept it. It should be removed. As truth would have it, that was the narrative being pushed up to just before the decision. The reason it didn't come to that hinged on the principal's final verdict.

By the rumors, our negligent principal who had just barely avoided dismissal by 'some sort of' political maneuvering had a certain pressure placed on him to not support the remove faction a large majority of our educators sided with. Conclusion: for a while to come, the atmosphere was tense and uneasy among our faculty. Dorisen alone was living his every day to the fullest.

Through all the gloom, repeated inspection recognized the artistic value of the temple, and with demands from the art organization coming in one after the next, those feelings were soon to lift like the mist. The teachers changed their hand; they had suddenly class changed to Guardians who protected a student's individual

expression. The heck is up with that? We were in a ‘What’s this!? I can feel the teachers’ human power increasing!? This cannot be!’ sort of state. Adults are amazing. Ly dirty.

At present verbose debates were being held over whether to leave it on the roof, or move it to some open plot of land.

It all happened somewhere that was off limits to begin with. Every single student knew that the ruckus that went on right above their heads was someone else’s business.

Inquiries to Ryouko increased. Every time, I would be dragged along. She wasn’t able to talk to adults she didn’t know, and even when she opened her mouth, it was incomprehensible, so an interpreter was necessary. What questions were alright? How far should her answers be editorialized? The decision was often left up to me. It was as if I was Ryouko’s manager.

In any case, it took a few months for the noise to die down, and there’s a continuation to the story of the day of the incident, so I’d like to end this matter with that.

Now as for what happened that evening when I returned home—

First, the three members of my family were waiting at the ready. Oh god, a family meeting.

That was an event that made me the most pitiful. What’s more, for that time, for some reason, Ryouko was to join me, delivered directly from the hospital in the nurse’s new car christened Sylphyria.

While I had changed into my uniform, Ryouko was in the same old cosplay.

Naturally, there were quarrels.

My family held an abnormal trauma of me reverting back into a dream soldier. I was finally forced to discard the face of an obedient son in rehab, choosing the command of covering for Ryouko. We argued two hours until finally, my sister took my side. Once that happened, it was anyone’s game.

Those concerned were kicked out, a discussion began between my

sister and parents as we were given a loaf of plain white bread, some jam, and driven up to my room. The two of us wearily nibbled on the bread. From the floor below, “Instead of a person who committed a mistake, why can’t you see him as a kid who successfully recovered!? You’re his parents, aren’t you!?” I heard my sister’s impassioned shout in my defense and put my hands together in my heart.

I didn’t know what to talk about with Ryouko.

I loaded up an on-rails shooter on my Wii. We played together. In silence.

“Bathroom.”

When I did my business and returned, Ryouko was brazenly rummaging through the accursed land in which I had sealed my trauma. My closet.

“Gyobaah!”

I wrapped my arms around her from behind, putting her in a wrestling lift as I hoisted her up. All of a sudden, she was wildly flailing her legs.

“Ouch, owww, hit my heel... owww!”

A direct impact to my bruise had me collapsed in agony.

“Ichirou, discovery.”

“Mn... aah... that...”

What Ryouko held was a single light novel volume.

“Did you not detest these?”

“Rather than detest... I used to like them. But by the time I noticed it, I wasn’t reading them at all anymore. I couldn’t look them in the face. When I liked them so much, I started finding them scary. On the last day of break, I gave myself one final push, and got rid of a lot of them.”

On that day, when I looked at the empty bookshelf, I felt as if I’d discarded my own heart along with it.

“What you have there are the remnants. I left a few adequate ones behind out of a bit of respect.”

“They’re all volume ones.”

“Indeed.”

“... Ichirou. Why didn’t you discard them?”

“Eh? Well, I don’t know myself, but,”

“But?”

There was a seriousness to Ryouko’s question. I thought. Flipping open a volume, I put my words together.

“... I intended to become a strong person, probably. Right now, with all the trauma, I can’t look at them straight, but if I get strong, I should settle down. There should come a day when I can give a nice and clear laugh and say, I really was an idiot back then. And then, I’ll buy the continuation all at once. When I’ve become a fine adult, that’s what I’ll do. I want to read light novels with a pleasant look on my face.”

By the time I noticed it, Ryouko was sitting right next to me. As if there were beams radiating from both her eyes, I started heating up from my face.

“I’m sure it’s not the books’ fault. I was just weak. Before you can become cool, I think you need the effort to become normal. I think everyone’s doing their best to act normal. There’s nothing cool about bragging about being a warrior from another world. I probably just hated who I was. Even so, I’d like to be someone decent. Someday.”

I looked straight in Ryouko’s eyes and told her.

“I want to become a decent me. One step at a time.”

Would she have any opposition? Would Ryouko hate that? It wasn’t either.

“... In order to do that?”

“Umm, in order to do that... I’ll fight against reality, how about that?”

“Those words,” came a showy sigh, “I’m tired of hearing them.”

“What else is there to say?”

“... Your swordsman clothes.”

“Those? It’s a complete rip-off of a character called Sephiroth from an old game.”

What’s more, compared to Ryouko’s cosplay, the detail was remarkably inferior. Not that I was jealous.

By the way, the origin of whoever said Zwei Bander was probably the same. I can tell. The awkwardness of doubling up source material is immense, so I'll be assertively avoiding that guy alone in times to come.

"In those clothes,"

"Yeah,"

"Spend a few days."

"That would kill me."

"Maryuin Koga ~ A New Enemy~."

"That's wrong. It's Maryuin Koga's Last Battle. The Last Battle part isn't a subtitle, it's a part of the main title. Like to say, that's the end of it."

"Maryuin Koga's Last Battle ~ A New Enemy~."

"Oh, now we're getting all Final Fantasy, are we? What even is X-2 supposed to mean?"

"I'm also curious about this Shimizu I never got to meet."

"Do you have me bugged!?"

"... Boring."

Losing her interest, Ryouko returned to the game console.

"Ah, hey, that attitude again... turn this way. Listen, what I'm trying to say is..."

I put my hands on her shoulders. Contrary to my expectations, her upper body easily rotated. As if that had been her intent from the start, her face approached, only a breath away. Aah, this is—

The moment before contact, I definitely heard.

"The swordsman was cool."

You liar, I tried to say, and failed. There was nothing I could do when my lips were sealed. It was a soothing, sweet—or not, it hurt considerably. My teeth.

Ryouko's punishment was suspension. Suspension of indeterminant length, they said. Quite heavy, if I do say so myself. I guess Dorisen determined that was better than pushing the matter and making it worse. I felt the same.

“Do your best to fulfill your duty.”

“Yes. Understood.”

With gauze near her mouth (I had it too), Ryouko accepted her suspension like it was nothing. Before she entered that period, we went to return the dragons' nails to Kume-san. At any rate, multiple nails had become a dead stock in her clutches. With some apologies, I brought her with me.

“Is that girl your girlfriend? That's amazing! You did it! Good work!”

Kume-san offered us a warm reception. Completely unfazed by Ryouko's outfit, Kume-san was definitely a bigshot. Granted, he did pull back a bit at her suspicious behavior involving glaring at his accessories from ten centimeters away.

When I explained the situation, “So that's what happened. It's fine, perfectly fine. I feel honored, even,” He quite easily forgave us. And from here on was the surprise.

“Honored? Whatever for?”

“I mean, I'm the one who made these charms to begin with.”

My eyes became dots.

“I mean... didn't you say you just happened to stumble by them on the net?”

“Sorry. Told a lie. I, see, I've always been thinking. Why didn't youkai, demons, that sort of thing exist? I couldn't accept it. In that case, why not give it a go and make one myself? The idea struck me when I was looking at the red sumo guy on the Sagawa Express delivery truck. I had this secret notebook I'd been drawing in since I was a kid, see.”

“D-don't tell me, that note is...?”

“Yeah. In the used bookstore... that one.”

“Uwah, so you're the one who drew that?”

“What can I say? The curses that came to mind, the demon tribe that once inhabited the earth, the vegetation that was affected by mana. I was good at art. I'd been drawing at least ten years by then. I know I'm not the right man to say it, but I think my last volume was finally looking kinda legit.”

“Uwaaaaah,” so they all did something like that.

“I used some sites limited to this town, made up some adequate legend, and prepared a gimmick. And what do you know?”

“It went and established itself?”

“That it did. It was a real joy to see.”

“You sure invested a lot into what wouldn’t make you a single yen.”

“I know, right? But I did have a profit. I created mystery in the world with my own hands. Though it’s limited to this town. This charm is my work. It’s like a local landmark.”

“You’re a charm smith?”

“Oh, that’s nice. I’ll be taking it. Oh, snap, I can’t put it on my business card. Satou-kun, with such a wonderful girlfriend with you, do you agree? It’s fine for there to be some mystery in the world.”

“I get it.”

“For real.”

As two men, we exchanged a passionate gaze.

“It would never have hit me before, but I get it now. I mean, I’m a swordsman.”

“Hahaah, a swordsman, eh. And your girlfriend’s a magician... that staff’s quite a tasteful piece... what should I go with?”

“Craftsman?”

“Alchemist.”

“Merchant.”

“... I wouldn’t want them picking up on my marketing factor.”

After a short laugh, Kume-san held his hand out to me.

“I kinda like you. How about we go see some ruins or a large factory next time. We can form a party.”

Looks like I really do have an affinity for drawing weirdos.

Even with judgment day come and gone, my life continued.

Having challenged his last battle with the resolve for death,

Maryuin Koga, AKA Satou Ichirou AKA yours truly was still battling against the lethargy filling every last crevice of my body and soul in

that unchanging space called the classroom.

I absentmindedly gazed to my left. For yet another day, Ryouko's seat was vacant. The suspension was supposed to have ended yesterday, but she didn't come to school. The one glance immediately withered any joy in my heart.

That morning, on my commute, people I didn't know pointed at me. They laughed at me.

While I had resolved myself for it, it's still rather harsh, to say the least.

I'm sure history must have had them. Just like me, those who unveiled some play so grand they could no longer look Lord Society in the face. There must have been tens of thousands, nay, hundreds of millions of rampage events. Just how did they live their lives after that, I wonder.

There must have been some trailblazer. I want to know. I want them to tell me. I'd learn that over school lessons any day.

"You seem bothered, Mens. I can tell from your aura."

Perhaps because I was dazing out in class, I never noticed Dorisen sneaking up behind me. Unable to give any proper reply, I curled up like a fish drying in the sun.

"Mens, your teacher understands your troubles well."

In that case, I wanted him to understand my mentality to not hold a heavy talk where everyone was listening.

"I had plenty of setbacks in my youth. But even those pains will become good memories someday."

"... One can only hope."

"They will, I mean," Dorisen's eyes opened wide. "That's precisely why I too, can embrace the undying flame of my mission."

"..... Hah?"

"You've moved me, Satou. I had to lower my head to the heated cries of your concealed past. The tried and true words of a hero resurrected my sealed soul. Ten years in obscurity. Taking on the transient post of teacher, there was worth in waiting it out."

"Yes? Pardon?"

Dorisen was acting strangely. Everyone in class turned as they

realized the change.

“Everyone, listen to this. I have something to confess. The truth is, I, Dorisen... am a Radiant Soldier!”

The classroom sunk into silence. A while later, “Eh? What?”

“What’s that mean?” “Was that supposed to be a joke?” I started hearing whispering.

“When we were choosing members for this class, I happily took on all the soldier syndrome sufferers from the other classes! There were a lot of them this year! It got all the other teachers in my debt, that’s two birds with one stone.”

The class was silent once more. Before long, “Haaaaaaaaaaaah!?” a single person furiously yelled out. Yep, that was me.

“That was your doing!?”

“Naturally!”

“And why!?”

“I thought if it were me, I could lead a soldier just as well as any other student... well, in any case, perhaps I’d find some of my True Radiant Comrades among them.”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The nightmare, again.

“You suffer from soldier syndrome!?”

“No, because mine is real.”

“You haven’t recovered. Sensei, you’re still very sick”

“You weren’t a Radiant Comrade, but I’m happy I found a real one like you, Mens.”

“Give me a break already!”

“And me too. One Radiant Soldier right here!”

The door suddenly slid open as the intruding nurse in a lab coat cried out.

“Midori-san! No... Esmeralda!”

“Rurio-chan! Nay... Saphir!”

Dorisen and the nurse embraced and kooked... I mean smooched. While that in itself weirded me out, the part I needed to poke at wasn’t the Oshidori Fuufu joke.

“What the heck was that!?”

“We’re married, don’t you know.”

“Right, we’re all lovey-dovey.”

“Not that part! That part about radiant and stuff, what in God’s name!?”

“I’ve been hiding it, but the two of us got to know one another on a reincarnation board back in middle school... we’re war buddies from our past lives! In the battle where the Radiant Camp fought off the lord of the dark forces, Zalaam—”

“Eeeeeeeek!”

It was a nightmare.

“This is an insult to your authority!” I fled all the way to the wall.

“You’re a failure as a teacher! In the first place, what’s with the lack of uniformity in all those terms!? Esmeralda is emerald in Spanish, but Saphir is sapphire in French, and Zalaam only means darkness in freaking Arabic! You’re way too indulgent with your setting! If you’re going to make something, at least base it on a unified backdrop!”

“... As expected of a first-rate soldier, to know your trivia to an annoying degree, Mens. There really was no error in my judgment.”

“I’m sure Mens-chan will lead us all, Rurio-chan!”

“Stop mucking around, you can’t ask me to look after adults.”

“Fufufu, we’re not the only ones you’ve led, Mens. For they too.”

Dorisen spread out his arms. With that as the signal, around half of the students restlessly stood to their feet. Them. Riled up by a supposed-to-be-good-role-model’s delusions, they were already on the verge of explosion.

“Is that true, Satou!? No, Koga!?” “Mm, as expected of the greatest genius swordsman of the Maryuin.” “If I drink the blood of the dragon tribe... will my thirst finally be quenched?” “I knew all along, Hewley, no, I should call you Koga now. I knew you reincarnated into another world and became a dark dragon swordsman.” “The will of space is shaking? Don’t tell me the stars quiver at a dragon’s might?” “I must get an eyeful of the Maryu technique not even the Oda Style Demon Lord of the Sixth Heaven’s blade cannot pierce through,” “I’ve solved it! The key to collapsing fate lost from the

Akasha Fragments! It was Satou all along, no Koga! It was you!" Their surging delusions became an unstoppable tide, crashing down on me with the force of a raging tsunami. A highest-level storm the likes of which I had never experienced before. I was jostled up in an instant. My heart and my boy were drowning.

"Stop! Just leave me be! I'm Satou Ichirou, not Koga!"

But they never had to ears to listen. I pushed my way through the sea of people with a crawl, tore off the zombies and escaped the game of push and shove. I flopped on the floor chin-first.

"Owww... dammit... someone!

I pleaded for help with the remaining half of class. If she would save me, even Ooshima would do.

Someone stood right before me.

A girl. From inside the skirt that hung over my head, a tepid body head, and gentle, mysterious fragrance radiated. She was standing considerably close, and if I looked up, I would reliably catch sight of undergarments. Who was it? The slender legs concealing a lively purity, for some reason, gave off a resolve as they stood gallant and imposing. Who, seriously, who?

Curiosity straddled ethics. Of course, I can't say I didn't have any indecent intent.

I looked up. My eyes looked up the short skirt, catching a hint of light-blue cloth as they made their way higher and higher. And at the zenith, I worshiped Kobato-san's noble countenance.

"Ichirou-kun."

Kobato-san was excited. Hah, hah, her breath was rough. Like a dog waiting for a treat. That was the first I was seeing such a lewd Kobato-san.

"W-what ever could it be?"

"M-me too! Do you think I have a cool past life too!?"

"Gyah." I cried out. "It's contagious!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if I did."

The fact that over half the class were residents of the delusional realm. That pressure imparted an influence even residents of the phenomenal realm couldn't ignore. Delusions beget delusions.

“A vaccine!” By this point, I was praying to the divine. “Someone get her a vaccine! It’s too late for me! But please, some wonderful real immunization that will overcome her delusion!”

“Ichirou-kun!” Itou helped me to my feet. “Can I call you Koga-kun?”

“Of course, you can’t!”

The normal students were already standing as well. Their dumbfounded faces gradually changed to more serious looks. One of them made their resolve and came over my way.

I wanted to cry out and curl into a ball. T-this familiar aura was...?

“Satou... the truth is, I,” he confessed, “I’ve got spiritual sense.

There’s this beautiful girl ghost in the classroom and...”

“Yes?”

“Satou, I’m sorry for ignoring you... the truth is, I’m a psychrometer.” Came the next.

“I can see peoples’ lifespans...” the people who were supposed to be decent,

“I might be yamanba, but I’ve actually been secretly training how to fight with wire since I was a kid... I think it’s at a level that can be used in combat...” not happening, I say.

“I was keeping quiet about it, but I’m a descendent of Himiko.”

Your parents are lying to you.

All of a sudden, the folks in class began confessing. What had started as confessions to me instantly became speeches to appeal to everyone around.

“What even is this?”

There was everyone. Every soul was crying out. The technique names and secret organizations flying about, the special constitutions and missions of absolute confidentiality, the tragic pasts and turns of fate, future and past and present life and past life, the curse placed in a concealed power.

The class itself became another world. Just who was proper, who was a dream soldier, and who was just shouting out for the heck of it, the distinction was impossible. Before I knew it, everyone was sick. There was Kobato-san and Itou, and Suzuki, and Kawai and

Takahashi and Yamamoto. Everyone happily waved around the memories sealed deep in their hearts as if it was the ticket to take part in the festivities.

The only calm person left apart from me had to be Ooshima. When it came to her, she simply spectated with a terribly stiff smile on her face. The powerless queen bee. I considered forgiving her at that point.

“Hahah.”

I ended up laughing. What. What’s this? Looks like everyone’s pretty cringy in their own right.

I could never have imagined it. This cringe—even if it was only a temporary flight of fancy—that I would ever be able to enjoy it. The classroom that had held class up to ten minutes ago had come crashing down as the binding came off. I couldn’t believe it. The power to believe wouldn’t actualize a delusion in a touch. But when so many people got to believing, perhaps a sense of values was infinitely malleable. For a group with a curse on it to continue functioning as a civilization, perhaps it’s possible even one’s delusions can serve as a form of individual merit. Perhaps the day would come when I learned how to use my own. And when that time came, we would grow into true soldiers. Surely.

The banquet would surely be over soon.

There was no telling when the neighboring classroom would catch wind and the teacher would rush over. But that was precisely where the value lay, for it was only as a moment’s radiance that it could remain so vivid in its strength, creepiness, and beauty. And yet, Ryouko wasn’t there. When she was the one who belonged there the most.

“At a time like this... she’s an idiot. Where did she go off to?”

I took out my phone. At the very least, I wanted to convey the voices, that atmosphere. Piety spins together history. The power to believe is the power of mystery. Bringing out the slightest show of courage was a trivial task.

After a few rings, she picked up.

“... Ryouko? Can you hear me? Where are you right now?”

‘This is The Researcher. Transferring to point in ten seconds.’
 Her unchanging voice spewed an unchanging line.
 Strangely enough, it didn’t irritate me. But, I jeered with a smile.
 “Yeah, right.”

Mn? Transfer in ten seconds? I get the feeling that pattern happened before.

Faster than I could recall, the door slid open again.

Don’t tell me. Don’t tell me with this timing? No way?

I made for the door. If the one who appeared was Ryouko—I might end up believing in fate. And once that happened, I’d be swung around by it for the rest of my life. I’d be subject to my fill of shame. Now fate, which path will you choose?

“Ichirou?” A familiar face abruptly stuck out.

“... Oh my, sis?”

The visitor who unexpectedly popped in was my sister.

“... Ah, there you are. What’s going on here? Not that I care.”

“W-what’s up? Why are you at school? What about your job?”

“... I’m working. I came to deliver something.”

My sister yanked out her parcel from behind and thrust it out before me.

It fell right into my chest. I ended up catching it in my arms. With all the parts scaled down from human size, I didn’t feel much weight, so at first, I thought it was a manakin in a school uniform. In my arms, the small head looked up at me.

Something excessively beautiful was there.

“Eh? You... huh?”

“... I-Ichirou...”

“You’re Ryouko, right?”

The lifeform cowering like a small animal was undoubtedly Ryouko. The simple fact she was wearing a uniform was a surprise, but the impression her face gave off was completely different from usual.

“Is it the hair? It looks a bit more orderly than usual.”

“... That girl,” my sister pointed at Ryouko. “Said she wanted to look proper, so I helped her out.”

“You did?”

“... Also, I did some all-around maintenance. I don’t know school regulations, so I didn’t use foundation or anything. Well, she’s young, and her skin’s superhuman, so she doesn’t need it.”

What do you mean superhuman? Was that a standard only woman understood?

Ah, but she was radiant.

When it wasn’t like she was in the direct line of any light source, my eyes felt itchy, causing me to squint. When I wanted to look, it was hard to see. When I wanted to look, she was blinding. A radiance brought by the would. At this sensation I was feeling for the first time in my life, I was unable to put up any resistance.

“I see. So you can... wear normal clothes...”

“... Yeah.”

Whoa! Honest to boot! A blitz of lightning raced through my medulla oblongata. This ain’t good. Not good, not at all. But amazing. Ryouko’s amazing.

I noticed her face up close seemed to have the details raised from before.

“Don’t tell me you’re wearing makeup too?”

“... She did it.”

Her gently curled eyelashes, her slightly more shapely eyebrows, her faintly colored lips.

Her striking eyes that would make me believe it if someone told me, “Boss, I chiseled those out of the finest agate” were so large, they gave her a foreign beauty to startle any who saw her, but the detailing around her eyes had skillfully compensated for that, bringing forth a more natural impression.

“... For her uniform, even the smallest one on the market was too big, so I had to custom it. Somehow managed to get it done by this morning. That’s why she was late, and I had to explain it and get her an exemption. That’s the masterpiece I poured my all into, you’d better treat it well.”

“Me?”

“Who else is there? Rather, how long are you going to hold her? You’re not in that sort of relationship yet, are you?”

“Dwah.” I took off both hands as if held at gunpoint. Even so, Ryouko didn’t move from her perch stuck fast to me.

“For the time being, normal clothing... was attempted... how is it?”

“Y-yeah. It fits you perfectly. You’re going to get hit on, like that.”

“Unnecessary...” Ryouko anxiously twisted her body.

“I see, so you’ve finally graduated from your delusions.”

“What do I do, Ichirou, what do I do?”

“You’ll be fine. There’s nothing strange about you. I’ll guarantee it.

Let’s do our best together!”

Wrong, she shook her head.

“Then what are you so nervous about?”

Her eyes teary, Ryouko pleaded to me.

“On top of lowering all defensive values to 0, this equipment is incapable of optical concealment...”

“You’re not healed at all!”

So it’s just the looks, hey?

“Sis, do up her insides too! Lay it on down the strong side!”

“... Don’t be crazy. And wait, that’s your job...”

“That was dangerous! I was this close to letting everything be water under the bridge and respecting you.”

“I do not hate being respected.”

“I won’t. I only respect normal people.”

In no time, the ruckus died down as attention concentrated on a single point. It was confusion and shock and envy that filled all eye. That was simply the fore Ryoukos transformation carried.

“Koga-kun.”

As a representative of the class, Kobato-san took one step forward.

Huh? What did she just call me?

“Would this alluring individual happen to be Satou Ryouko-chan?”

“So it seems.”

“Amazing... you’re like a Dollfie, Ryouko-chan! We’re friends, aren’t we?”

In an instant, Kobato-san’s soul was drawn to Ryouko.

“Way to go, Ladies.” “She transformed, that girl,” “What do you call this sorta debut?” “Mens looks tasty,” “Who’s the one who said to

ignore her?” “Fufu, so the witch returns to a single young girl. Oh don’t worry, just leave the rest to me,” “A new battle is close upon us, don’t drop your guard, Kogao.” “I must report this to the Dark Prison World,” “Very well, Maryuin. Grow intoxicated with your victory. Just you wait.” “It is all as the predictions foretold. But Koga’s true worth will be assessed in times to come,”

Along with the idiots’ comments, Ooshima’s shaking voice mixed in. “... That’s not fair.”

No doubt she heard the sound of her stronghold falling apart. And finally, “Heeey! What is this noise! Any outbursts should prepare to face the wrath of Inomata!” the banquet was over. Desks and chairs fell over as everyone scrambled to be the first back in their seats, with everyone colliding into one another in one last burst of chaos towards frigid order.

Within that big bang, Ryouko and I held hands without either side initiating it.

“Ichirou.”

“Yes?”

Mixed in with the chaos, she softly whispered into my ear.

“Can you teach me ‘Normal’?”

This is Romeo Tanaka (Human Power 2Hu)

This time, I tried challenging the most basic of the basics in genre, a school romcom. As it does seem you have picked up this book, you have my sincerest of thanks. Before being a writer, as a single businessman, I'll have to give you some (slimy...) warm gratitude. Now as an author, I'd be happier if you enjoyed the contents too.

This novel was serialized in the monthly magazine PC Angel neo (As it contains highly sexual material, I can't recommend any readers under the age of eighteen check it out) under a column of the same name, and it has been published here in a form that expanded upon that. It's not like I didn't have anything to go off of, I just reused whatever I'd submitted there to make my life a... with the thought of delivering everyone the purest of dreams in mind, I got permission to withdraw it.

From my heart, my thanks go out to the PC Angel neo editing department that readily gave consent.

In the end, I couldn't take it too easy and I ended up going over the expected schedule, forcing me to activate the special power I had sealed off, the Terminal Flash Writing. This is a loveless technique consisting of realizing your writing speed is dropping along the way, so you end up writing the ending first, and spend the rest of it mechanically filling up the center. If any normal person utilizes it, their motivation towards creating the work declines, but my special ability allows me to write on without losing motivation. The reason being, my love is absolute. To all writers who are confident in their love, please try it out by all means.

Now then, I went and wrote a novel like this, and I'm sure there are those of you out there wondering if the writer also had a past rife with delusions, but unfortunately, not in the slightest. I'm a slave to common sense, and when it came to my old-fashioned old man, he was a stick in the mud who wouldn't endorse the slightest bit of mischief. After growing into a fine adult, there were times I found myself actually saying "I am but an observer of history, so I can't stand on center stage"... that is... all... (blush). And that statement was a complete rip-off of Paptimus-sama... you know... (super blush).

If I'm not talking about myself, then up to now, I have encountered those with the superpowers of 'Endless Relative' and 'The Forgetful Curse'. The former allowed one to draw upon unlimited authority from their relatives, giving them an absolute advantage that would, in essence, let them rule the country. The later was an accursed existence would suddenly come out with strange cries or curses but would forget all about them afterward. My elementary school self believed both of them wholeheartedly. I've decided to think it was thanks to that sincerity that I'm here right now.

This time's illustrations were done by mebae-san. As you can see, his artistic style gives way to a true abundance of expression. The way his rough illustrations contained all the slightest of gestures and tones I had commented on proved to be a wonderful reference when I was writing. I truly am thankful. While it was the first time he ever illustrated for a novel, there really are some amazing people in the world. When he said, "I don't want to write an afterward in this book. "My art speaks enough," surprised as I was, I felt like saying, "I-I agree..." . Aah...
I'll do my best.

It might be my nature as a writer, but there are times I have an excessive urge to write romcom. If there's a demand, I think I'll

have another chance, and if that does tickle someone's fancy, I'm sure everyone will deliver their verdict to me through the special ability 'Wireless Run'. The good thing about telepathy is that the service comes free of charge. Or you could send in surveys instead.

Now then, any flashes of unnatural sentences you may see in this text must have come from our editors at Shougakukan.

Have a nice day.

Tanaka Romeo

Born in 1973. A freelance writer whose work centers around PC games. Often found working at home, the regional community has recognized him as conclusively unemployed. His treatment as an honorary member of society (part-timer) continues, despite his repeated assertions that he has a job. Who's responsible for this? The Mayer? There's something I simply have to talk to you about, real soon.